A special issue

The New Criterion

The Arts in America 1945-1985

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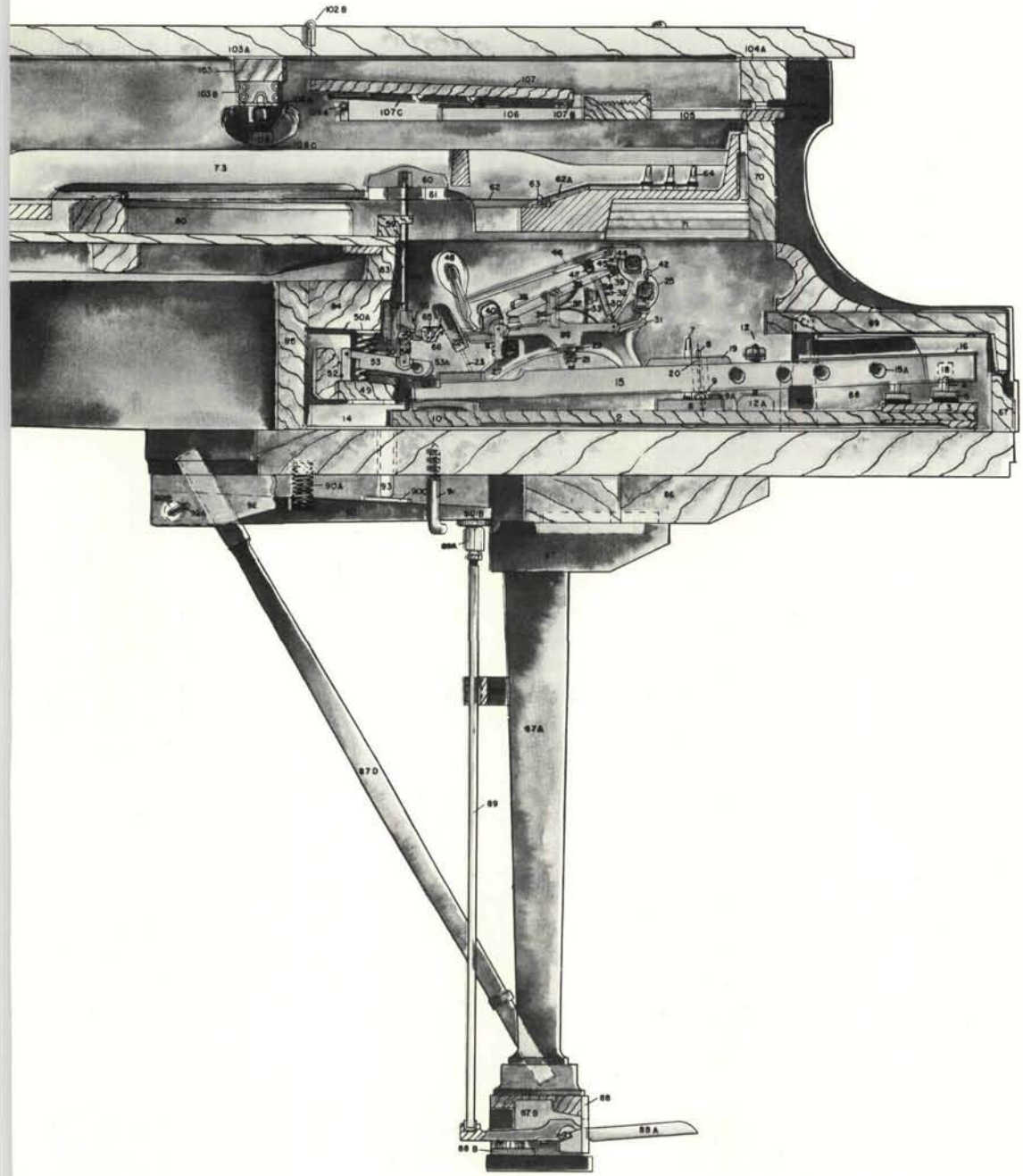

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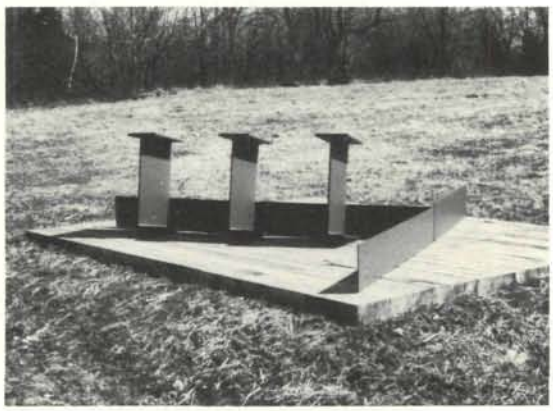

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Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer writes regularly for *The New Criterion* on literary subjects. His many contributions to this journal have included discussions of novels by John Hawkes, Don DeLillo, and Truman Capote, among others. He has also written for *Newsweek, The New York Times, The London Review of Books, The Nation,* and *The Wall Street Journal.*

Hilton Kramer is the editor of *The New Criterion.* He was formerly the editor of *Arts Magazine* and the chief art critic and art news editor of *The New York Times.* He is the author of *The Age of the Avant-Garde* (1973), a collection of critical writings on the art of the modern period. *The Revenge of the Philistines,* a new collection of art criticism from the years 1972-1984, will be published by The Free Press in October.

Samuel Lipman is the publisher of *The New Criterion* and the music critic for *Commentary.* His essays and reviews have been collected in two volumes, *Music After Modernism* (1979) and *The House of Music* (1984). He is a member of the piano faculties of the Aspen Music Festival and the Waterloo Music Festival.

Robert Richman is the poetry editor of *The New Criterion.* He has written for many publications, including *Commentary, The Times Literary Supplement, The American Scholar,* and *The Village Voice.* For *The New Criterion* he has written about the poetry of Edward Thomas, Roy Campbell, Geoffrey Hill, James Fenton, Rosanna Warren, Frank Bidart, and Amy Clampitt.

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American art since 1945: who will write its history?

by Hilton Kramer

The critic who looks back from the perspective of 1985 to the American art world as it existed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War discovers straightaway that something very odd has happened to his subject. It has, in a sense, become unrecognizable. To a degree that would have been unimaginable only a very short time ago, it has been turned into an intellectual battleground from which the artists then at work and the works of art they produced at the time—heretofore regarded as the primary materials on which the art history of the period would naturally be based—have all but disappeared from the discussion. Just the other day, it seems, there was a lively debate in progress about the relative standing of Pollock and de Kooning, of Rothko and Newman, of Motherwell and Still, as recent exhibitions and publications afforded critics and historians new opportunities to re-examine their work and thus assess the strengths and the weaknesses—even, perhaps, the failures—of the artists who made up the New York School. (For contrary to popular belief, there has never been a settled, unchallenged view of the achievements of these or any other artists of the New York School, either among the critics who wrote about them or among the artists who succeeded them.) But now, quite as if it had been suddenly discovered that the question of achievement was somehow irrelevant to a true apprehension of the New York School as a historical phenomenon, this critical debate has been largely suspended, and something else has taken its place.

What has been erected—overnight, as it were—as a substitute for the discussion of the art itself is an elaborate edifice of ideology and argument which purports to contain whatever explanations may be needed for understanding the single most important event in the art history of this post-World War II period: the emergence of American art to a position of commanding interest and influence on the international art scene. From this new perspective, it is assumed as an article of faith that such explanations are most emphatically *not* to be found in whatever aesthetic merit may be claimed for the art, but rather in political developments which the artists in question are seen to have served as complaisant accessories and which they could neither avert nor resist, in any case, even if they had wished to do so (which, according to this view, they did not). What has happened, in short, is that the New York School has been hauled into "court"—as one prominent scholar has approvingly dubbed this new approach to art history[1]—and made to stand trial on charges of aiding and abetting the influence of the American political system.

It is altogether bizarre, of course, that in a democracy such as ours, which in the period under discussion had just fought and won a

1 Professor Linda Nochlin, writing in the January 1985 issue of *Art in America*.

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war against one totalitarian system and was now being drawn into a cold war against another, it should be considered any sort of "crime" to support the interests of a free society against its enemies. What makes the whole proposition truly grotesque is that the alleged offense can scarcely be said to have been committed. While many of the artists of the New York School were in some sense anti-Communist—owing largely, I suspect, to the Communists' well-known opposition to all forms of modernist art—it is my impression that they remained generally leftwing in their political sympathies where they were not simply apolitical. The only explicit political avowal to be found in the entire history of Abstract Expressionist painting—that of Robert Motherwell's well-known series of *Elegies* to the Spanish Republic—can hardly be regarded as any sort of assertion of Cold War ideology. On the contrary, it pays homage to one of the most unquestioned anti-fascist pieties of the liberal Left.

What the avowed politics or non-politics of the artists of the New York School actually were, however, is a matter now judged to be immaterial. Whatever it was the artists believed they believed, whatever it was they did or did not do, they are now found to have served as accomplices of American government policies—even, it should be noted, at a time when government officials, including the President of the United States, were denouncing the whole phenomenon of modernist art as inimical to the national interest. "This is where the true force of the historical contradiction comes into play," writes Serge Guilbaut in his much-discussed book, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art,* which attempts to strip the New York School of its claims to a disinterested artistic achievement.[2] From the perspective of Guilbaut's book, which provides us with the canonical text of this indictment, the entire history of the New York School constitutes an unconscionable "game of concealment," and it is the task of historical analysis to reveal to us what the artists and their political masters have, until now, so effectively succeeded in concealing.

Given the provenance of the indictment, which stems from a wish on the part of Marxist ideologues to discredit both the achievements of American art ***and*** those of the American political system, it was inevitable that the art would be found to be guilty of the charges brought against it. Yet if the outcome of this "trial" was foregone, as is usually the case with Marxist "justice," what wasn't entirely foreseeable was the alacrity with which its verdict and the charges which led to it have come to enjoy a certain measure of legitimacy even among those who are in a position to know how very false they are. It tells us a great deal about the present condition of American cultural life that, four decades after the emergence of the New York School, hardly a single champion of this historic movement in American art—and in modern art generally—has come forward to refute, publicly and definitively, this purely political interpretation of its success. The American art world can now boast of a great many critics and scholars, as well as curators and collectors and connoisseurs, who are expert in the history of the New York School, yet none has openly and energetically challenged this effort to de-legitimize what they themselves regard as an historic artistic achievement. Their silence—which can only be accounted for, I think, by their fear of being seen to take an anti-Left position on what is as much a political as a cultural controversy—is truly remarkable, and constitutes a real betrayal of the values which they ostensibly espouse.

As a result of this abdication of scholarly responsibility, the historiography of the New York School in particular and of the whole development of American art since 1945 has lately been reduced to something of a shambles. Any writer hoping to make sense of the subject is therefore obliged to clear a path through this ideological debris as a prologue to re-establishing even a min-

2 *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* by Serge Guilbaut (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

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imal sense of historical actuality. In this regard, it is imperative that we acknowledge at the outset that there *is* a political dimension to this subject, even if it is mainly a negative one. It is to be found in the rejection by the artists of the New York School of the Social Realist ethos in art which dominated a very large part of the American art scene in the Thirties and which was openly hostile to the very idea of abstract art. Such a rejection inevitably entailed a break with the Stalinist line, which stigmatized all forms of modernism as examples of bourgeois decadence. To repudiate the Social Realist standard was not merely to repudiate a style. It meant repudiating a commitment to a politicized mode of expression, and to declare, in effect, that the real purposes of art lay beyond the reach of political definition. It is in this sense that the emergence of the New York School out of the debacle of Thirties social consciousness and the Popular Front can truly be said to have had a political dimension. It was not the Abstract Expressionist style per se that was unacceptable to this entrenched "progressive" mentality; it was the very notion that the function of art would no longer be governed by this sectarian conception of its social mission.

Nowadays it is sometimes forgotten that the influence exerted by the Social Realist movement—and not only in the Thirties when the Communist Party and its allied organizations and publications played a significant role in determining the outlook and the standards of American cultural life, but even into the Forties and early Fifties when the Party was politically discredited—was simply immense. The artists who came out of this Social Realist tradition—not all of whom were Communists, by the way, though some were—continued to be regarded as constituting the mainstream of American art for years after Pollock and Rothko and others had their first solo exhibitions and began to acquire a modest following. When the U.S. State Department assembled a collection of American paintings right after the war and sent it on a tour of European museums, the selection was dominated by pictures of a Social Realist character. Abstract painting was still considered too exotic and alien to be given anything more than a marginal representation. Even in the Fifties, a Social Realist like Jack Levine was given a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art long before any painter of the New York School was accorded a similar honor.

As far as the American art establishment was concerned, the leading American painter of this period was still thought to be Ben Shahn, a veteran supporter of Communist causes and a stalwart of the C.I.O. and the Progressive Party who was also the darling of the Museum of Modern Art and *Time* Magazine (in a period, it should be recalled, when *Time* was still routinely heaping ridicule on the New York School). And when Harvard University finally got around to appointing an American painter for the first time to its coveted Charles Eliot Norton professorship in the Fifties, the honor inevitably went to Shahn, whose Norton lectures, subsequently published under the title, *The Shape of Content,* were clearly meant to be taken as an implicit attack on the claims of the New York School. (Thirty years would elapse before Harvard saw fit to appoint an American abstract painter—Frank Stella—to the Norton professorship.) For much of the decade that followed the end of the Second World War, establishment opinion was content to give the palm to the reigning remnants of the Social Realist school.

Given this situation, any artist who broke with the basic tenets of Social Realist art put himself at considerable risk. There was little or no market for abstract art, and little to be expected in the way of public honors or recognition. Why, then, did so many finally bring themselves to take this fateful step in the Forties and early Fifties? Serge Guilbaut puts the question another way in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art.* "Why did so many painters switch," he writes, "from doing realistic propaganda pictures in the Thirties (whether of revolutionary, liberal,

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or reactionary inspiration) to painting in a resolutely avant-garde manner in later years?" Never mind that this reference to "realistic propaganda pictures" hardly accounts for what Gorky or Rothko or de Kooning or Gottlieb had been producing in the Thirties. Guilbaut is not the sort of writer who would ever allow himself to be cowed by inconvenient or insufficient data. Invoking the magical principle of "historical contradiction," he explains that "Avant-garde art succeeded because the work and the ideology that supported it . . . coincided fairly closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections."

As Guilbaut sees it, President Truman's victory in the 1948 election is somehow to be construed as a victory for the Abstract Expressionists as well. Thus, when he speaks of the "victory" which the New York School achieved in 1948—the year, incidentally, that de Kooning had his first one-man show and Pollock produced his first "drip" paintings—it isn't in the realm of aesthetics, which can scarcely be said to exist for him, that he sees this "victory" as having occurred. What he has in mind is something more mysterious and metaphysical, perhaps. "There is no paradox in speaking of a victory of Abstract Expressionism as early as 1948," he writes, "even if the avant-garde was then under attack from all sides, from the Left, from the Right, from the populists, and even from President Truman." Despite these attacks from all sides, what actually happened in that fateful year—or so we are asked to believe—is that the Abstract Expressionists succeeded in producing the kind of art that would henceforth "represent the values of the majority," "the dominant ideology," etc. Neither the artists nor the majority—nor, of course, Harry Truman—were aware of this amazing meeting of minds; "only a minority" is said to have been "capable of understanding" this concealed victory. The exact identity of that minority remains something of a blur, however. We never do find out who they were.

As art history, all of this is the sheerest rubbish, for it is history based on ideological scenarios that are completely removed from the real life of art. But it is, alas, the kind of rubbish that has now achieved a macabre intellectual legitimacy. Yet to write in this manner is to deny to art any significant role in determining its own history. It is precisely this denial, oddly enough, that appears to constitute the main appeal of a mode of historical analysis so clearly designed to eliminate aesthetic motives as well as aesthetic ideas—not to mention the individual artistic will—from serious consideration. Art history without aesthetics: that is the direction in which this new methodology—which is only the old Marxist methodology given a new vocabulary and a new impetus—is leading us. But what, it may be asked, are we left with when we separate art from its aesthetic substance? Can we then any longer speak of art as anything but a social or an ideological datum? That, of course, would seem to be the point of this critical enterprise—to strip art of its aesthetic autonomy and reduce it to a mere coefficient of someone else's idea of historical necessity. Thus, what politics—Marxist politics—failed to achieve the first time around, namely the destruction of an independent artistic will, criticism now attempts to accomplish in retrospect by programmatically altering the historical record.

If we return to that question about the changes which took place in American art that led to the emergence of the New York School in the Forties and restore to the realities of artistic thought the role it actually played in determining those changes, we shall be a good deal closer to the actual history of the period. The fact is, the "switch," as Guilbaut calls it, to painting in "a resolutely avant-garde manner" was anything but the overnight event he suggests it was. It represented, on the contrary, the outcome of a protracted conflict that had raged, sometimes publicly but more often privately, in the American art world throughout the Thirties. It was a conflict that placed the struggling modernists of the period in

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sharp opposition to the reigning taste of the time, which, whether governed by the populist standards of the Federal Art Project, the cultural program of the Communist Party, the benighted policies of the museums, or the philistine outlook of the public at large, was resolutely anti-modernist. For a majority of the modernists—John Graham, who had fought against the Bolsheviks in his native Russia, may have been an exception—this was not, for the most part, a conflict which allied them with the enemies of the Left. Far from it. Most of them were liberals or radicals. But they refused to forfeit their artistic independence to the political pressures of the period. In the great achievements of the modern movement in Europe—examples of which were more and more to be seen in New York in the Thirties—they had glimpsed a realm of aesthetic possibility which clearly transcended the parochial outlook of established American taste. To produce an art which met this higher standard (as they saw it—and they were right) became their dearest wish, and it was to the realization of that goal that they dedicated their talents and their lives.

It will always be a question—and an unanswerable one—as to how much these dedicated modernists would have achieved if the war had not totally altered their situation. But alter it the war did in ways that no one could have foreseen. The fall of Paris to the German army had the effect of bringing to New York a sufficient number of European modernists to constitute a kind of avant-garde-in-exile, and this, in turn, gave to the isolated and embattled band of American modernists precisely the kind of impetus and example that was needed. The story of these crucial war years has now been told many times, but its importance cannot be overestimated for the role this episode played in all that followed in the Forties and Fifties. What it altered, however, was the way certain artists thought about their work—and about the very nature of their ambition as artists. Notions of representing "the dominant ideology" or "the values of the majority" quite simply had nothing to do with the changes that were wrought in American art in these years.

In this respect, it is important to point out what had *not* been altered by the war and the ambitions that came out of it, at least as far as these isolated modernists were concerned. And the principal thing that remained unaltered was this sense of isolation—which, if anything, grew even more intense as the artists' ambitions and their sense of *artistic* possibility expanded. This, at least, was the judgment of the shrewdest critic writing at the time. At the beginning of 1948—the very year in which the New York School is said by Serge Guilbaut to have come to represent "the values of the majority"—Clement Greenberg wrote an article in *Partisan Review* in which he declared that "the best painting done in this country at the moment does not reach the public eye, but remains west of Seventh Avenue, stacked against the wall."[3] He was referring to what has come to be called the New York School, of course. He was pretty pessimistic about its prospects, too—not its *artistic* prospects, in which he thoroughly believed and about which he proved to be prophetic, but its social and commercial prospects.

> One has the impression [he wrote]—but only the impression—that the immediate future of Western art, if it is to have any immediate future, depends on what is done in this country. As dark as the situation still is for us, American painting in its most advanced aspects—that is, American abstract painting—has in the last several years shown here and there a capacity for fresh content that does not seem to be matched either in France or Great Britain. Yet the general crisis does not spare us and . . . the situation still opposes itself to the individual artist with an unfriendliness that makes art life in Paris or even London idyllic by comparison. With all our relative advantages, much more is still required of us in the way of exertion, tenacity, and independence in order to make an important contribution. The

3 "The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review*, January 1948.

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> American artist has to embrace and content himself, almost, with isolation, if he is to give the most of honesty, seriousness, and ambition to his work. Isolation is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art in America.

So much for representing "the values of the majority" in the year of Harry Truman's election victory.

How, then, can the history of this immensely rich and complex period in American art—the years since 1945—be written? Can it be written at all when the "isolation" which Clement Greenberg spoke of in 1948 is so easily converted into its opposite less than four decades later with so little opposition or protest? Everyone recognizes that the life of art in our society has in many ways been radically altered since Greenberg wrote in such dour terms about "The Situation at the Moment" in 1948; that the "unfriendliness" to the individual artist which he accurately described—and decried—in that article has in some ways changed over the years to something at times more nearly resembling a strangling embrace. This change, too, which has moved the artist in American society from a position of precarious marginality to one that still remains to be defined but that is unquestionably closer to the sources of patronage, if not of power, is an important part of the history of this period. Yet this is the aspect of our recent history which has proved to be the most difficult to trace with any precision or even, in many instances, to discuss with a rudimentary fidelity to the facts. For every analysis of the artist's position in American society, then or now, will be found to contain an agenda designed to influence policy, budgets, appointments, commissions, reputations, and publicity. Never before in the history of American culture has the writing of art history—that is, the writing of *our* history—engendered so much in the way of political paranoia, on the one hand, and self-serving promotion, on the other. It is not only the past that is being misrepresented in this process, but the present as well.

Take this matter of the "isolation" which Clement Greenberg spoke of in 1948. Given the stupendous budgets now lavished on contemporary art by government agencies, corporate patrons, museums, dealers, and private collectors, and the stupendous publicity apparatus that serves to amplify and exaggerate the effects of those budgets, it would seem that everything has worked to obliterate this sense of isolation from the lives of American artists. But has it? No doubt for certain artists—those we read about in the pages of *Vogue* and *House and Garden,* in *People* and the "Style" section of *The New York Times*—it has; though even a few of them, if they are not completely besotted by their own success, must sometimes wonder if they are not as much the victims as the beneficiaries of the particular kind of attention that is now routinely devoted to them. But about most other artists in our society, certainly most serious artists, one can write in 1985 as Greenberg wrote in 1948 without altering a word: "With all our relative advantages, much more is still required of us in the way of exertion, tenacity, and independence in order to make an important contribution." From the perspective of these artists, isolation may not be regarded as the natural condition of high art in America, but it persists, all the same, as the prevailing condition. And success, when and if it comes, only exacerbates the difficulties inherent in that condition—to the extent, that is, that it does not destroy the artist's ability to function as an independent mind.

Nowadays, however, there is a powerful disposition—as political as it is commercial—to believe otherwise. We are positively offended by the notion that an atmosphere of unabated attention and acclaim might actually pose a threat to the life of art. Slowly but inexorably, by unnoticed increments but at an ever accelerating pace, we seem to have arrived at a situation in which we regard the limelight, with all of its attendant distortions of value, not only as the natural venue for an artist's growth and development but one which it is mandatory

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for society to provide for him. And once this limelight has been provided, there is a corollary disposition to suspend critical judgment about the results and grant the artist a kind of apodictic right to do whatever he pleases regardless of the cost or the consequences. Fame, kudos, and commissions are assumed to confer on the artist something akin to a divine dispensation, which effectively reverses the relation that formerly obtained between artists and patrons and hands over to the former all the prerogatives hitherto belonging to the latter.

Had this bizarre notion remained confined to the realm of private patronage, one might lament the more atrocious consequences of the phenomenon and criticize them accordingly, but they would remain, all the same, an affair to be decided between artist and patron. But as the cultural situation has evolved in this country in recent years, it was inevitable that this phenomenon would not remain a matter of private patronage. Sooner or later, as government came to play a larger and larger role in the country's cultural affairs, it too was bound to become involved in this strange reversal, which, probably for the first time in history, made the patron answerable to the artist rather than vice versa. And since the patron in such a case serves as a representative of the public interest and the public treasury, it could only be a matter of time—since the United States is neither an autocracy nor, as we might say, an *art*ocracy—before the limits of this divine dispensation, as I have called it, were tested by an appropriate challenge to the privileges it had come to enjoy.

Such a challenge came this year, of course, when the General Services Administration, the federal agency which for some time has functioned through its vast Art-in-Architecture program as the country's principal patron of public art, found itself obliged to conduct an open hearing on the suitability of one of its largest commissions—the sculpture called *Tilted Arc,* which Richard Serra has created for the plaza of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan. For the future historian of American art, no episode in the recent annals of our cultural life is likely to be more illuminating or instructive than this one, for in the course of this hearing we were given a more vivid account of the present state of established opinion on art—established, at least, among those who administer our art institutions and formulate its values—than would ever be vouchsafed to us in a learned journal or an academic forum. Some one hundred and eighteen people spoke in favor of the sculpture, and while their views and their authority to voice them naturally varied in some particulars, there was nonetheless an amazing consistency to be found in what they said. I think it does no violence to their views to characterize them as uniformly endorsing this notion of the artist's divine dispensation. In keeping with the implications of this notion, speaker after speaker affirmed the idea that when it comes to creating public art, even when the art is commissioned by a public agency for a public space, the artist's rights are absolute and the public's rights—indeed, the public's right to have any rights in the matter—are nil. A great many people who go to work every day in the Javits building had complained about the Serra sculpture, which consists of a rust-encrusted Cor-Ten steel wall that bisects the building's plaza and (according to some of the complaints) obstructs easy access to the building itself. (The wall measures one hundred and twenty feet in length and twelve feet in height.) Some fifty-six of these people were sufficiently distressed about the sculpture to speak against it at the hearing, but their specific objections were never really addressed by the curators, critics, artists, and arts administrators and publicists who came to defend the Serra work and scorn all those who voiced their complaints. Instead the hearing was treated by these ardent champions of the artist's freedom to a series of lessons in the history of the avant-garde and the opposition it had met with in nineteenth-century France, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, etc.

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WILLIAM RUBIN:

Like many creations of modern art since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, *Tilted Arc* is also a challenging work that obliges us to question received values in general and the nature of art and of art's relation to the public in particular . . . .

About one hundred years ago, the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists Monet, Gauguin, Cézanne, for example, artists whose works are today prized universally, were being reviled as ridiculous by the public and the established press. At that time, the Eiffel Tower was being conceived and constructed. Only to be greeted by much the same ridicule.

BENJAMIN BUCHLOH:

Only once in the history of the twentieth century was the domain of art and culture officially removed from the competence of its producers and the professional judgment of its academic and administrative supporters. And it was handed over to the spontaneous "practice of the collective prejudice."

That was the moment when the fascist demigods of the German Nazi party encouraged the populace to destroy the culture of . . . [the remainder of this sentence is incoherent in the transcript—HK].

. . . What the German fascists declared to be the element of deviate and dirt, of madness, venereal disease, and the art of the avant-garde and its threat to a non-existent pure culture of the Aryan race, re-emerges now as the threat of crime and terror hiding behind Serra's rusty wall and the mounds of garbage and the tribes of rats that the sculpture attracts.

If this pathology of prejudice becomes policy, even in only one single case, you might as well start purging the contents of the Museum of Modern Art. Its contents, just as Serra's work, could easily attract the scorn and prosecution of a mobilized mass of prejudice that has now allowed itself or has not been allowed by our institutions to learn to become competent.

EMILE DE ANTONIO:

New art, particularly good new art, lives at the edge of human experience and feeling. It is a challenge to old ways of seeing and living. This is why Stalin destroyed a great Soviet art, and it is why the French middle class sneered at Cézanne, it is why Hitler destroyed "decadent" art, and it is why the yahoos of the G.S.A. propose to move *Tilted Arc*.

From those paintings "stacked against the wall" in 1948, out of reach of the public eye, to the *Tilted Arc* and the parade of witnesses testifying on Richard Serra's behalf, we have indeed come a long way. There is now vastly more new art being produced, and a vastly greater quantity of it meets the public eye and wins a handsome measure of patronage and financial support. Two recent news stories in *The New York Times* may be taken as emblematic of the situation in which we find ourselves in the 1980s:

> Four large outdoor works by major contemporary artists will be added to the ambitious public art program of Battery Park City Authority, and will be placed among the real-estate development's skyscrapers and walking paths over the next two years, project officials announced yesterday.
>
> The artworks will be placed in small parks along a 1½-mile esplanade bordering the Hudson River. They were commissioned by the authority from the artists Ned Smyth, Nancy Graves, Richard Artschwager and Mary Miss, the last of whom designed an entire waterfront cove area in collaboration with the architect, Stanton Eckstut. [April 25, 1985]

> In what is perhaps the largest partnership ever forged between art and real estate in Manhattan, the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States announced yesterday that it plans to integrate three art galleries and numerous major sculptures, murals and designed plaza spaces into its new midtown corporate headquarters.
>
> The arts complex will form the most publicly accessible portion of the Equitable's new corporate headquarters—a 54-story, $200-million skyscraper now nearing completion on Seventh Avenue. So far, company officials say, about $7 million has been spent on art, and

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> more purchases are expected before the Equitable Center, as it is to be called, opens in October. [May 14, 1985]

One notes with interest that the key word used to describe the art in both these stories is "major." But anyone who knows anything about new art that is acquired on such a scale knows that precious little of it is likely to be major or even minimally accomplished. "Major" is a word that is now used to describe art that is big or well-publicized or expensive; it has little or nothing to do with aesthetic quality or artistic intelligence. We have indeed come a long way, but the way has led us right back to the nineteenth century, with its proliferation of kitsch decoration and the inanities of the Salon. The best observation of this phenomenon I have seen is to be found in an article written by Kenworth Moffett two years ago in *Partisan Review*. While I do not agree with many of Mr. Moffett's judgments on particular artists, it nonetheless strikes me that he has given the future historian of American art in this period an important clue to the spirit that governs our commerce with new art at the present time.

> Fashionable contemporary art [he writes] is the most visible new art, the most exhibited, discussed, and reproduced. It is the most expensive new art, dominating the auctions as well as the shows and acquisitions of most of the museums that deal with contemporary art. It dominates the literature on recent art, and the salons, the official survey shows of contemporary art such as the famous Paris salon of the nineteenth century . . . . What we see in the salons [today] is what the professional audience (critics and curators) thinks is important, and this audience, or at least the great majority of it, is just like most of the nonprofessional audience: it likes fashionable new art best . . . .
>
> The most successful salon art—the most fashionable of fashionable art—always makes a big assertion and is offered as a candidate for "important" or "serious" art, but it inevitably becomes a period piece when things get sorted out. A period piece is mainly of sentimental appeal and charm. It has "historical interest." At the opposite pole from the period piece is the masterpiece, the great work by the great artist. No one would ever call a great Rembrandt or a great Cézanne a period piece, but we experience the typical pictures of Rosa Bonheur, Bouguereau, and Alma Tadema, salon stars of the late nineteenth century, primarily as period pieces. They don't transcend their time, but succumb to it, and we're amused. But as art, as personal expression, a Bouguereau is banal and obvious. Indeed, its sheer obviousness is exactly what made it so popular in its time, and what makes it "camp" today.[4]

Pondering this passage, which describes so much of the new art one sees today—and will see tomorrow at the Equitable Center—one wonders what has really changed about "the natural condition of high art in America." Both the scale of production and the scale of immediate recognition and reward have been expanded beyond the wildest dreams of the Forties. But true seriousness in art, like real accomplishment, remains as rare, as isolated, and as embattled, as it ever was.

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4 "Abstract Art and Middlebrow Modern," *Partisan Review,* Number 2, 1983.

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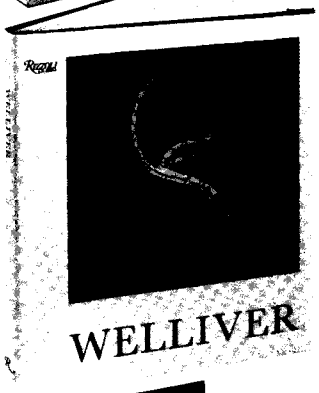

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Diminishing fictions: four decades of the novel

by Bruce Bawer

The question . . .
is what to make of a diminished thing.
—Robert Frost, "The Oven Bird"

One day a few years back, when I was in graduate school, a professor and I were chatting idly about Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos—writers that I had been reading lately, and that, as he told me, he had lionized as a teenager in the 1930s. "Who is it you kids look up to now?" he asked. "Who are your idols? Who do you think is writing the Great American Novel these days?" I considered the question. To be sure, there were contemporary American novelists that I respected, that I read with pleasure; but none of them meant to me what Hemingway and company had meant to my professor. The fact was, I didn't wait breathlessly for *anybody's* next novel; there was no magnificent vision, no grand style out there that had changed my life. "Nobody," I said, and was myself surprised—and more than a little dismayed—that this should be my answer. He nodded grimly, as if he'd expected nothing else—indeed, as if he'd asked the question precisely in order to confront me with my own reply.

It was not—and is not—a pleasant verdict to render. But there it is, like it or not: the American novel *has* lost a good deal of its prewar glory; it *doesn't* matter quite so much anymore; it is no longer the flagship of the American arts, the most conspicuous of the mirrors we hold up to ourselves. Whether the golden age of the American novel was the 1850s *(The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick)*, the 1880s *(The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Portrait of a Lady, The Rise of Silas Lapham)*, or the 1920s *(The Age of Innocence, The Enormous Room, An American Tragedy, The Great Gatsby, The Sun Also Rises, The Sound and the Fury)* is open to question, but it would be difficult indeed to support the contention that any American novel published during the four decades since World War II has been quite worthy of comparison with the masterpieces of these earlier periods.

Why is this so? The explanation offered up by the professors and critics usually runs more or less as follows: Freud, Darwin, and World War I shook the assumptions about the meaning and continuity of human life on which the novel (especially at its nineteenth-century zenith) was once based; World War II, the Holocaust, and the Bomb destroyed them. There is indubitably a great deal of truth in this, even if the doubt, disillusion, and despair that have characterized the work of many a postwar American novelist seem more than a bit contrived. Many of the major American novels written before World War II, after all, were thick with doubt, disillusion, and despair; but there's despair and there's *despair*. What saved these prewar novels from being mere testaments of doom was the fact that their protagonists, as a rule, were men and women of substance. Doomed

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or not, they were genuine heroes, who actively sought to construct for themselves a life built upon useful work or positive beliefs or order or happiness or love. Titles like *The Titan* and *The Great Gatsby* are only partly ironic. Gatsby *is* great, not for his wealth but for the tenacity with which he clings to a dream of innocence; even Jake Barnes, the hopeless, emasculated wretch in *The Sun Also Rises* who has left innocence far behind, is a man of stature by virtue of the stoic faith with which he accepts his personal fate; and so on. Even the most tormented of these pre-World War II protagonists had a grandeur about him, a true tragic dimension, and if, at the end of the book, he was destroyed by a universe that was indifferent to his fate, the feeling was that something *important* had been done in. Someone of value, someone whose existence in the universe made an ethical and emotional difference, had waged the good fight against the forces of futility. There *were* such things as courage, character, moral strength, beauty, truth, devotion. Whether they had triumphed or not, they meant something. They were good. And by recognizing this, in spite of their nearly overwhelming *Angst,* the great prewar American novelists demonstrated memorably that one thing, at least, which gives a novel significance and dimension is its creator's zealous devotion to that part of every human soul that fights in the interests of these virtuous attributes. These writers' accomplishments affirmed, in short, that there is an aesthetic value that proceeds from a deeply rooted belief in the nobility of human feeling.

So it was, alas, in the prewar American novel. In the postwar novel, by contrast, there has generally been more compulsive doom and gloom than there has been forceful opposition to it; the poor wretches whose lives and thoughts and souls are at the center of the postwar novel have typically been less tragic than pathetic, less heroes than ciphers. This is not to suggest that one should condemn a novel simply because it takes a gloomy view of the world. It is only to observe that in one book after another, the major novelists of our day have, intentionally or not, allowed their relentless negativism to work against the best interests of the form itself; wittingly or unwittingly, they have renounced the vitality, the abundance, and the breadth of artistry that for more than two centuries have consistently distinguished the great novels of the world. Many postwar novelists, of course, feel that they have no choice. They are convinced that we live in an age of chaos and fragmentation; that the novel, whose roots lie in the eighteenth century's love of order, is a relic; and that a contemporary novelist, consequently, is incapable of rendering as full and faithful a picture of his society as did his predecessors in ages past. I am speaking here, naturally, not of the major American novelists of the prewar era who continued to publish fiction after the war (the most notable of whom, Hemingway and Faulkner, won their Nobel Prizes for books published during this period), but of the younger generations of writers who have established the dominant literary tone of the post-1945 era, and in whose books a narrow and artistically unprofitable passivity has been the rarely broken rule. It is, after all, not only Saul Bellow, among our postwar novelists, who has concerned himself with victims, not only John Updike who has chronicled the timid movements of contemporary American rabbits on the run; one postwar novelist after another has directed his attention to such inert folk. There have, to be sure, been prominent novels (mostly Beat or Beat-influenced) whose protagonists have managed to escape this epidemic of psychic stagnancy. But, as if to suggest the impossibility, in the postwar world, of meaningful (let alone heroic) action, these protagonists have tended to assert themselves in, to say the least, refractory ways: by engaging in aimless movement (Jack Kerouac's 1957 *On the Road*), by practicing obsessive debauchery (William Burroughs's 1966 *Naked Lunch*), by committing outrageous atrocities (Norman Mailer's 1965 *An American Dream*), or by participating in one type or another of nihilistically conceived, if often entertaining,

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nuttiness (Joseph Heller's 1961 *Catch-22,* Ken Kesey's 1962 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 *Cat's Cradle,* Tom Robbins's 1976 *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues,* John Irving's 1978 *The World According to Garp*).

The American novel, then, has travelled a bumpy road these past forty years. Among its more distasteful manifestations during this period have been the metafictional novel and what we may call the "workshop novel," both of which I propose to discuss presently. Perhaps the most striking novelistic phenomenon of all, however, has been the annexation of fact—whether straight or twisted, autobiographical or historical—onto the crumbling house of fiction. Though the reasons for this turn of events are no doubt as diverse and as complicated as the writers involved, two or three generalizations seem fair. First, since World War II the interest of the American public in serious fiction has declined precipitously; whereas in the prewar years novels sold twice as well as books of nonfiction, the postwar years have seen those figures reversed, and it is likely that some novelists have noticed this and acted upon it. Second, some novelists have patently decided that novels consisting entirely of invented stories and characters can do little or nothing to illuminate the important truths of our age, and that the incorporation of significant public figures or events into a novel is bound to lend it greater validity. To some of these novelists, of course, the "important truths" are not metaphysical or psychological but social and political in nature, and the real public figures and events which they inject into their novels tend to be drawn from the sociopolitical realm. Third, more and more postwar novelists—like their poetry-writing contemporaries—have become fascinated with the Self (which is often a nice way of saying that they have become fascinated with themselves). Some of these writers may well feel, with Philip Roth, that in a civilization too complex to be captured in a novel—an America whose boisterous day-to-day history is, as Roth has written, "a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination"—a turning inward is the novelist's only resort. At any rate, what it all comes down to is one single dismaying fact: that in the past forty years, many of our most highly regarded novelists have lost respect for the fictional way of truth.

The most famous contemporary American novelist to find himself walking the nonfiction trail is, of course, Norman Mailer. Though he is probably the most well-known novelist of our time, his fictional corpus is an awfully dreary one. *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), his competent but rather tiresome imitation of Dos Passos, has been succeeded by one ill-aimed Existential stab after another into the dark belly of existence: *Barbary Shore, The Deer Park, An American Dream, Why Are We in Vietnam?, Ancient Evenings, Tough Guys Don't Dance.* While most of these novels read as if they were, for Mailer, dismal chores—books motivated primarily by a vague feeling that to be America's greatest writer one must produce novels (a conviction that would seem to be the sole legacy of the Age of Hemingway)—such books of nonfiction as *Advertisements for Myself, The Prisoner of Sex,* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago,* though one would hardly classify them as immortal works of literature, have been marked by a liveliness, a naturalness, an exuberance that Mailer's fiction rarely possesses. As anyone who has read one or two of these nonfictional books knows, their chief topics are invariably (a) events and personalities of national prominence (be they in politics, boxing, crime, or literature) and (b) Norman Mailer. This fearsome duality owes a lot, it should be said, to the ethos of the "New Journalism," with its unqualified regard for the notion that, in any work of reportage, the reporter is as important a part of the story as anything else.

Despite *Marilyn* and its ilk, however, the overall emphasis of Mailer's nonfiction has been decidedly political. The mere fact that he entitled one of his novels—one of his *fictional* novels, no less—*Why Are We in Vietnam?* would seem to suggest that he is

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inclined, at times anyway, to mistake the political issues of the moment for the metaphysical questions of the ages. As we know, Mailer has run for elective office (and lost); he has even dreamed of being president. Indeed, in a 1956 *Village Voice* piece, he proposed at least half seriously that the Democrats nominate Ernest Hemingway to run against Eisenhower—but even that colossal egomaniac failed to share Mailer's notions about the proper role of the novelist in the national life. Mailer's greatest critical triumphs, as it happens, have been two books that were extremely political, the remarkable *Armies of the Night* (1968) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979)—both volumes of nonfiction that Mailer, in the wake of Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* (1965), presented to the world as novels.

Though American writers have not taken up the "nonfiction novel" in droves, many of the most celebrated of them have, like Mailer, continued to plug tediously away at the novel-as-fiction, while proving far more engaging as purveyors of nonfiction. Among these writers are Gore Vidal, whose acerbic essays are a good deal more captivating than his bloated, oddly inert novels (some of the more recent of which—*Burr, 1876, Lincoln,* etc.—are, at any rate, not so much works of fiction as they are slightly reshaped hunks of history); Joan Didion, whose sensitive, clever pieces in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) outshine such dark, dry little fictions as *Play It as It Lays* (1970); Mary McCarthy, whose literary essays and lovely memoir, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957), are unquestionably more valuable than facile novels like *The Groves of Academe* (1952) and *The Group* (1963); James Baldwin, whose racial and sexual rage are more eloquently expressed in his essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), than in such variously flawed novels as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956); and Joyce Carol Oates, whose relentless prolificity seems less damaging to her essays, somehow, than to her increasingly pointless and prolix works of fiction.

Other contemporary novelists, meanwhile, especially since the mid-Sixties, have spiced their fiction liberally—and, at times, radically—with historical figures and events, often for obvious political reasons. William Styron, for instance, at a time when black militancy was at its height, published the controversial *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which took the form of a memoir of the famous insurrectionist, and which seemed to count among its purposes the justification of violence in the service of emancipation. E. L. Doctorow wrote *The Book of Daniel* (1971), an uneasy, politically obsessed hodgepodge of fact and fancy based on the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and containing passages that appeared to belong not in a novel but in a political tract:

> The final existential condition is citizenship. Every man is the enemy of his own country. EVERY MAN IS THE ENEMY OF HIS OWN COUNTRY. Every country is the enemy of its own citizens . . . . In war the soldier's destruction is accomplished by his own Commanders. It is his government which places a rifle in his hands, puts him up on the front, and tells him his mission is to survive. All societies are armed societies. All citizens are soldiers. All Governments stand ready to commit their citizens to death in the interest of their government.

Doctorow also gave us *Ragtime* (1975), which was lauded on publication for the "charming" way it incorporated real-live turn-of-the-century folks like J. P. Morgan and Booker T. Washington into an invented story, but which (as some readers have come to recognize) was essentially an indictment of the American system. In a similar vein, Robert Coover wrote *The Public Burning* (1977), a fantastic vision of the Cold War in which the central figures are the lovable Rosenbergs and the invidious Richard M. Nixon. Coover is not the only novelist to have made Nixon a character; Philip Roth and Joseph Heller, for example, have both published rather silly novels—*Our Gang* (1971) and *Good as Gold* (1979), respec-

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tively—set in the Nixon White House. (Even Herman Wouk has recently gotten into the act with a potboiler called *Inside, Outside* about a Nixon administration appointee.) Yet another manifestation of the cult of fact is Styron's nobly intended but troubling *Sophie's Choice* (1979), which could justifiably be accused of trivializing the Holocaust, and in which Styron introduced his protagonist, a young Virginia writer named Stingo, in such a way as to make the reader feel that this *must* be the young Bill Styron. Similarly—though in connection with less devastating matters—Oates began her most admired novel, *them* (1969), by saying that "This is a work of history in fictional form," and proceeded to inject herself, as the heroine's teacher, "Miss Oates," into the narrative. Clearly, both Styron and Oates were acting upon the peculiarly post-World War II notion that "a work of history in fictional form" is, for one reason or another, to be preferred to a plain old work of fiction.

These are—is it necessary to say this?—rather disturbing developments. Though all too many of our postwar writers seem to believe otherwise, to insert real public figures, living or dead, into a book of fiction, or to "prove" a point about historical events by distorting them and their consequences, is not necessarily the way to greater truth; such practices can, on the contrary, in the hands of ignorant or ill-meaning authors, serve to propagate misconceptions about important chapters of American history. This is not to suggest that history has no place at all in the novel, or that our contemporary novelists are the first to render their own versions of historical fact. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey, Henry V* and *Julius Caesar, War and Peace*—it would be difficult to list all the literary classics which have been inspired by famous people or historical incidents. In our own country and century, *An American Tragedy* was based on a heavily publicized court case. Indeed, it is not the incorporation of fact into postwar American fiction, per se, that distresses one so much as it is the meager artistic merits of the literary works that have been the products of the widespread adoption of this approach. If Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy saw history as a means of illuminating timeless human truths—and if Dreiser, feeling the same way, took a murder case out of the headlines of the day and broadened it into a universal story of the human condition—our contemporary novelists tend to do the opposite: to narrow the human condition down to the spirit of the age (a smaller theme), and to narrow that, in turn, down to the events and issues of the hour. If no postwar American novel stands out above the rest—if none has, in other words, succeeded in transmuting contemporary life into deathless art—we can, I believe, place a good deal of blame on the inclination of our novelists to perceive the human condition in our time and country as little more than a gloss on our political and social history.

This is true not only of the nonfiction-happy writers that I have mentioned, but even, to some extent, of such inveterate writers of fiction as Saul Bellow and John Updike. Bellow, for example, has published a number of ambitious, thoughtful, and ponderous novels—*Dangling Man, The Victim, The Adventures of Augie March, Seize the Day, Henderson the Rain King, Herzog, Mr. Sammler's Planet, Humboldt's Gift,* and *The Dean's December*—in which he has, as a rule, been more concerned with expressing his ideas and opinions than with rendering a convincing fictional universe. To him a novel represents, in the main, an opportunity to air his views on American life; and a protagonist (whether he be Augie March, self-consciously "American, Chicago-born," or Henderson, whose cry of "I want, I want, I want" is apparently the pathetic postwar American equivalent of Kurtz's tragic "The horror! The horror!") is not so much a representative man as an out-and-out symbol of an uneasy age. One would not, to be sure, think for a moment of denying the manifold virtues of Bellow's novels—most notably the sense they almost always convey, à la Dostoevsky, that one is in the presence of a

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rich and vibrant intelligence, a mind that is painfully aware of the precise emotional contours of passion and suffering. Yet at the same time it would not be unfair, I believe, to call Bellow's books "novels-as-essays," and to suggest that his *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (1976), a work of nonfiction, is perhaps more representative of his true strengths.

Which brings us to Updike, who for better or worse is probably the closest thing we have to a laureate of postwar middle-class American life. In several of his novels he has, by his own admission, attempted to represent the spirit of American life under various presidential administrations (*The Centaur,* Truman; *Rabbit, Run,* Eisenhower; *Couples,* Kennedy; *Rabbit Redux,* Johnson; *A Month of Sundays,* Nixon; *Rabbit is Rich,* Carter)—the underlying assumption manifestly being that a change of administration makes that much of a difference in the life of the spirit. Accordingly, *A Month of Sundays* (1975) begins: "Forgive me my denomination and my town; I am a Christian minister, and an American. [Shades of *Augie*!] I write these pages at some point in the time of Richard Nixon's unraveling." Page two of *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) finds our excuse for a hero, Harry Angstrom, remembering his father-in-law who had "[l]oved to talk Republican . . . and when Nixon left him nothing to say he had kind of burst. Actually, he had lasted a year into Ford . . . ." Most political of all, perhaps, is *The Coup* (1978), whose narrator is an African dictator given to outbursts of hatred toward "the simultaneously most expansionist and most avowedly idealistic of power aggregations"—that is, the United States; the book, utterly unconvincing as a character portrait, is a true novel-as-essay on the subject of American foreign policy. While straining desperately to "say" something about life in the American century, then, Updike doesn't really manage, in these uniformly accomplished but oddly uncompelling novels, to say very much at all about *life.* His protagonists, like Bellow's, are invariably intended to symbolize The Contemporary Condition; like Bellow, he seems more interested in taking his protagonists through a series of tellingly archetypal present-day adventures than in structuring novels that provide balanced and believable pictures of contemporary American lives. Like Bellow, he has therefore been inclined to make many of his novels rather desultory —or, to put it otherwise, "picaresque."

This polemically motivated taste for the picaresque is a common one among major American novelists of the postwar era. The most important postwar novel by a black writer, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), might in fact be described as a contemporary black odyssey, a self-conscious parable of the twentieth-century "black experience." Though Ellison's novel succeeds artistically in spite of this contrivance, the slighter novels of Philip Roth, which make use of this same device to describe the American Jewish experience, often do not. To be sure, the adventures through which Roth has led his protagonists in such novels as *Letting Go* (1962) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977) have had very little to do with politics and a good deal to do with the authorial self-fascination that I have spoken of. *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and *The Breast* (1972), on the other hand, while they are obviously the products of an egocentric sensibility, might well be best understood as egregiously "with it" acts of social hyperawareness—that is to say, as Roth's contribution to the sexual revolution. Like Updike, Roth has, in latter days, appeared to be the victim of a falling-off of imaginative energy, manifested by, among other things, the production of several novels concerned with the adventures of a single protagonist who, in several key particulars, much resembles Roth himself. Updike, of course, has the *Rabbit* novels, and Roth has what he has now dubbed the *Zuckerman Bound* series: *The Ghost Writer, Zuckerman Unbound,* and *The Anatomy Lesson.* The latter volume—representing as it does an elaborate act of vengeance on Irving Howe (who appears in the novel as Milton Appel) for his review of *Portnoy*—is probably the apotheosis of Rothean self-absorption. Indeed, it may well represent the

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epitome of the blinkered, solipsistic tendencies that have afflicted the American novel in the postwar era. For a writer of Roth's importance to base an entire novel upon his irritation over a single review of one of his previous novels seems almost to be an offense against the form itself. For in so doing he trivializes the novel, places a petty act of personal revenge on the same level as the comprehensive depiction of human society that is the novel's traditional province. Interestingly, both he and Updike—by ironically coupling, in the titles of *Rabbit Redux* and *Zuckerman Unbound,* the silly-sounding names of their protagonists with adjectives that are redolent of antediluvian literary majesty—appear to be acknowledging this relative narrowness of scope, to be saying, in effect, "Please don't expect too much of me."

Many of the writers I have mentioned have produced valuable novels. But too often these novels have been valuable more for their comprehensive documentation of the social mores of our era than for their literary artistry. The more ambitious, in fact, our best novelists have become—the more strenuously, that is, they have attempted to define the nature of the beast or the spirit of the age—the less successful they have been. Joseph Epstein, in reviewing Bernard Malamud's novel *God's Grace* (1982), put it memorably: "Poor Malamud, the larger he strains to become, the smaller his talent begins to appear." Especially in the light (or, rather, the gloom) of Mailer's excrementally infatuated epic *Ancient Evenings* (1983), and the latest, rather disappointing works of Bellow and Updike, this observation might well serve as an apt verdict upon the achievement of all our major postwar American novelists.

In a sense, the most satisfying postwar American novels have been the work of writers who have decided *not* to try to outdo *Ulysses* or Hemingway or Faulkner or to write something definitive about the American century, but who have chosen rather to investigate various corners of the human heart. Among the books—plain and ornate, realistic and fantastic—that belong in this category are J.D. Salinger's colloquially written tale of a perturbed prep-school Huck Finn, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951); May Sarton's luminous portrait of an aging woman's lonely struggle for "peace, order, and poetry," *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Sing* (1965); Edmund White's arresting Kafkaesque sketch of life in a summer beach colony, *Forgetting Elena* (1975); Toni Morrison's enchanting, fantastic story of a small-town black life, *Song of Solomon* (1977); and Cynthia Ozick's intelligent narrative of a dedicated French Jew who becomes a Midwestern school principal, *The Cannibal Galaxy* (1984). These novels have little in common except that, though they are hardly masterpieces, they have been artistically more successful, overall, than the productions of our so-called literary "heavyweights." If they fail to explore the heart as broadly or deeply as a full-fledged masterpiece, they do evince a pleasing consistency of vision, of style, of tone; if the perceptions that they convey are not of a Dostoevskian profundity, they are at least expressed with undeniable elegance. A disproportionate number of these novels have been the work of Southerners—writers who are manifestly the heirs of Faulkner, though they have operated on a somewhat smaller scale. The more evocative and compelling of these novels have included Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958), Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961). Compared to the would-be epic poems of Mailer, Bellow, Updike, and such, these writers' novels are exquisite lyrics.

Opposed, in style and scope and everything else, to these pleasant novelistic oases is that sprawling Kalahari Desert of literature known as "metafiction." The writers who have won the greatest celebrity for practicing this strange, surrealistic adaptation of literary modernism—among them, John Barth *(Giles Goat-Boy, Letters),* William Gaddis *(JR, The Recognitions),* Don DeLillo

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(Running Dog, The Names, Ratner's Star), John Hawkes *(Second Skin, The Lime Twig),* and Thomas Pynchon *(Gravity's Rainbow, V.)*—give the impression that they consider themselves the only writers of the postwar era who have been ready, willing, and able to capture the *Zeitgeist,* to write the *Ulysses* of postwar America. The chief problem with the metafictionists, unfortunately, is that they have been even more distracted from the human condition than "mainstream" writers like Mailer and Bellow; like those writers, they have been eager to define the spirit of the age, but they don't seem to think that the spirit of the age has very much to do with the *human* spirit. Their novels, consequently, tend to be marked not by a desire to make sense of human society (which is, after all, the novel's traditional concern) but by an effort to proclaim, usually in language as inelegant, inaccessible, and pseudoscientific as possible, the tyranny and ineluctability of inanimate systems—whether governmental, military, or corporate. Not only does metafiction hold these systems culpable for the depersonalization and fragmentation of post-World War II civilization—and, therefore, for the supposed obsolescence of the conventional novel—but it equates them with the indomitable mysteries of existence.

What's more, since many metafictionists are products of the English Department, they seem never to get used to the idea that the writing of fiction is an act of creation involving the manipulation of language, and consider it clever to remind us constantly of this amazing circumstance. They are, in short, more interested in writing about writing than in writing about anything else. This scrap of John Barth's *Letters* (1979) is typical:

> . . . when we say NOVEL, for example, we refer at once to at least 5 things: (a) (what we take to be) a document in the guise of an extended fiction of a revolutionary character; (b) a 5-year plan for the composition of that document; (c) a five-year plan for effecting, in part by means of that document, certain novel and revolutionary changes in the world; (d) the title of a (also known as RN) and the code name of b and c; and (e) the code name for this Novel Revolution itself and the 5 several years of its implementation . . . .

Need I add that, like the Mailers and Updikes, the Barths and Pynchons rarely lose sight, for long, of the newspaper headlines? From the closing pages of *Letters,* this sample passage:

> . . . the Author outlines this last on Tuesday, July 4, 1978. The U.S. Bicentennial was celebrated, in the main, quietly, two years since, by a citizenry subdued by the Watergate scandals, the presidential impeachment hearings, the resignation of President Nixon, and his full and complete pardon by President Ford, himself defeated four months later by President Carter, with whom this week's polls show only 23% of the electorate to be satisfied. The post office has raised the first-class postal rate to 15¢ per ounce. Vice-President Mondale has returned from private talks with Egyptian President Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Begin meant to renew the stalled Middle East peace negotiations. New fighting in Lebanon. *RN,* ex-President Nixon's memoirs, is #3 on the New York *Times* list of nonfiction bestsellers . . . .

Though educated, nonacademic Americans have evinced little interest in exploring this fogbound literary territory, the canon-compilers on campus—who have kept metafiction alive—tend to regard it as *the* significant fictional mode of our time. And academia is, frankly, where these books belong. Though some of them do have redeeming aesthetic qualities (Pynchon's short 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49,* for instance, has a certain offbeat charm), they are, as a rule, designed to appeal to the sort of sensibility that is more suited by nature to textual research than to literary criticism, that confuses pretentiousness with profundity, and that mistakes ponderousness for stylistic innovation. Metafiction is based, moreover, on the notion that literature has less to do with making sense of the world—

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how, the metafictionists ask, can one make sense of something that is senseless?—than with glossological game-playing.

Within limits, of course, there is nothing wrong with playing with words; the main problem is that writers like Hawkes and Gaddis have made such a dull game of it. And an unimaginative one, too: for despite all the academic hoopla over the "innovativeness" of these books, the game doesn't vary all that much from one to the other. The most notable exception to this rule is Vladimir Nabokov. Though he has written books that are notoriously unnavigable (for example, the gigantic 1969 *Ada*), and though all of his published works (especially the 1962 *Pale Fire,* which takes the form of a series of scholarly annotations) are ideal dissertation fodder, Nabokov stands head and shoulders above the rest of the metafictional crowd. He is one postwar American novelist (or, more precisely, Russian-turned-American) whose postmodernistic game-play is successful, especially in the brilliant *Lolita* (1958), where the linguistic sport is witty and apt, exquisitely underlining that wonderful novel's central concern with the faithful representation of human feeling.

Alas, Nabokov has had no successors. The prospects for the American novel are, at present, as bleak as they have ever been. For metafiction has not been the only inauspicious consequence of the postwar academic institutionalization of literature. While the English departments of America have been busy inflating the reputations of the Barths and Pynchons, the creative writing programs have been busy too, distributing advanced degrees to armies of students who have learned how to make "workshop fiction"—spare, elliptical exercises in tone, metaphor, and (above all) obsessive surface detail that, although often well written, seem in most instances to have been deliberately shorn of passion, force, animation, and originality.

The writers who have made this brand of fiction the literary wave of the Eighties tend, like their master of masters Raymond Carver, to favor the short-story form, and the novels they do write—for instance, Ann Beattie's *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976) and *Falling in Place* (1980), Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams* (1984), Elizabeth Tallent's *Museum Pieces* (1985), and Elizabeth Benedict's *Slow Dancing* (1985)—are inclined to be so narrow in scope and modest in their ambitions that many of them read like extended short stories. Indeed, some of these novels actually *are* short-story collections in disguise (Susan Kenney's *In Another Country,* Andrea Lee's *Susan Phillips,* Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine,* all published within the past year). Whatever the genre, these authors are inclined to write frequently in the present tense; to favor the short declarative sentence (*very* short and *very* declarative); to be preoccupied with domestic details (cooking, dishwashing, laundry), with the most banal of contemporary phenomena (TV commercials, trailer parks), and with brand names; to transmit clues to the nature of a protagonist's personal torments as dryly and emotionlessly as if those torments were just so many trite domestic details; and to think that surface details, if piled up high enough, can help us to see through to the heart. Many of them cheerfully refer to themselves as children of television, and acknowledge the influence of the soap opera and music video upon their work; while they may also be described, in a sense, as the descendants of John Updike, John Cheever, and J.D. Salinger, their prose, alongside that of Updike and Salinger and Cheever, looks all the more vapid and mechanical. If the metafictionists are fruitlessly "experimental," these writers, who seem to aim not for some high literary ideal but for the pages of *The New Yorker* (or a Knopf contract), are dismayingly unexperimental—and just plain unimaginative. One novel or story after another consists mostly of passages that sound exactly like this:

> Holly, swinging her legs from the kitchen stool, lectures her mother on natural foods. Holly is ten.
>
> . . .

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. . . Holly wants to eat peanuts, soyburgers, and yogurt. Waldeen is sure this new fixation has something to do with Holly's father, Joe Murdock, although Holly rarely mentions him. After Waldeen and Joe were divorced last September, Joe moved to Arizona and got a construction job. Joe sends Holly letters occasionally, but Holly won't let Waldeen see them. At Christmas he sent Holly a copper Indian bracelet with unusual marks on it. It is Indian language, Holly tells her. Waldeen sees Holly polishing the bracelet while she is watching TV.

• • •

Joe McClain is punctual, considerate. Tonight he brings fudge ripple ice cream and a half-gallon of Coke in a plastic jug. He kisses Waldeen and hugs Holly.

Waldeen says, "We're having liver and onions, but Holly's mad 'cause I won't make Soybean Supreme."

"Soybean *Delight,*" says Holly.

(Bobbie Ann Mason, *Shiloh and Other Stories*)

Or this:

As soon as Mrs. Harrington got home, she hurried into the kitchen. Her son Roy was watching "Speed Racer" on television. He was fourteen. She heard loud music in the background: Jennifer; Blondie—"Dreaming, dreaming is free."

• • •

Her daughter came in, sucking a Starburst. She had on a pink blouse Mrs. Harrington didn't much care for. "How was it?" she asked, beginning to scrub the pots.

"Fine," said Mrs. Harrington.

"What's for dinner?" Roy asked again.

"Chicken. Broiled chicken."

"Again?"

"Yes," Mrs. Harrington said, remembering the days before when chicken hadn't mattered. Those days took on a new luxury, a warmth to match Christmas, in this light—the four of them, eating, innocent.

"Can I make some noodles?" Roy asked.

"Noodles!" Ernest shouted . . . .

"Dad called," Jennifer said.

"Was he at home?"

"He and Sandy are in Missoula, Montana."

"Ha," said Mrs. Harrington. "One minute in Trinidad, the next in Missoula, Montana."

(David Leavitt, *Family Dancing*)

Or this:

The rain has stopped. Charles turns on the radio. Elvis Presley is singing "Loving You." Elvis Presley is forty. Charles turns off the radio. Susan wipes tears out of her eyes.

• • •

. . . Charles goes into the kitchen, looks through the cabinets to see what there is for dinner. Susan is right; he thinks about food too much. He picks up a package of dried peas, drops them back on the shelf. There is a large bottle of vanilla, a package of dried beans, a box of Tuna Helper, no tuna, a can of baby clams, two cans of alphabet soup, a canister with four Hydrox cookies (what happened to them? They used to be so good. Sugar. No doubt they're leaving out sugar), a package of Cheese Nabs, and a can of grapefruit juice. There is also a package of manicotti shells. They will have to go out for dinner.

(Ann Beattie, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*)

"So what?" one wants to scream. If all this obsessive detail were actually leading somewhere, one's reaction might be different. But no such luck. These flat little kitchen scenes are *it*—they're not lead-ins, not quiet domestic interludes between chunks of more compelling, dramatic stuff. They are the whole enchilada. Of course, we are meant to understand, amid all the meal preparation and television viewing, that our heroes are suffering in one way or another—facing divorce, disease, "relationship" problems, the passage of time, the approach of death. But we don't ever get very close to this emotional turmoil; the approach is elliptical throughout, and one gets the idea that, to these writers' way of thinking, a fuller, more direct treatment of human suffering would somehow be unbearably vulgar, *démodé*. It would certainly be more difficult to carry off.

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Such, then, are the ways of the "Hey-I-Can-Do-That" school of fiction. Between the flat dialogue, the persistent allusions to Kool-Aid and "General Hospital," the endless descriptions of meaningless movement and insignificant activities, and the tepid little plots (often obviously autobiographical) that revolve around troubled relationships, cancer victims, and family tensions, it is hard to tell the work of one of these young writers from that of another. In the American fiction of the Eighties, unhappy families are all unhappy in pretty much the same way.

There are some standard variations on this formula, of course. In the work of some of our very newest writers, the detail-heavy, lightweight workshop prose is allied with what might best be described as a kind of knee-jerk, new-wave nihilism. More ambitious than their domestically oriented contemporaries to take on The Age, these young writers have transformed the profound, embattled despair of the major prewar novels into something very superficial, solipsistic, and modish; but then it is ridiculous even to speak of them in connection with the prewar novel, for they seem to be less influenced by writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Dos Passos—let alone Shakespeare and Swift—than by the mindless, self-indulgent anarchism of the new-wave scene. Their novels tend to take the form of slim, disjointed little tributes to East Village chic or Los Angeles decadence and to have titles like *It Was Gonna Be Like Paris* and *Less Than Zero.* (Even a good novel like Jay McInerney's 1984 *Bright Lights, Big City* flirts with nihilistic chic nine-tenths of the way through before throwing it over decisively.)

Just as nihilism, then, has become a Campy diversion, a "lifestyle," for legions of upper-middle-class young Americans, so it seems poised to become a literary conceit for many members of a generation of writers whose lack of understanding of the history and possibilities of the genre in which they are working is exceeded only by their lack of interest in honestly representing the depth and variety of human life in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In this, they have, sad to say, succeeded only in taking their elder and better-known colleagues' depredations of the novel form one step further. The American novel, to state it plainly, seems headed for some very grim times indeed.

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Music and musical life: the road to now

by Samuel Lipman

Despite all the warning signs in musical life—a shortage of significant new music, lowered standards in performance, and the declining commitment and sophistication of audiences and patrons—it is the fashion today to see serious music in America bursting forth at every moment and in every place. In order to sustain the fiction of a splendid present, it is necessary to treat music in this country as if it were an activity without a history. All those statistics so beloved of funders, grants recipients, and the media testify, supposedly, to a growth so splendid and a present so bounteous that any recollection of a usable past seems instantly dwarfed by comparison. Before World War I, it would appear, we had nothing save the barnstorming tours of such foreign celebrities as Kreisler and Paderewski; between the wars was the age of jazz and the big bands; after World War II whatever nascent musical urges we might have had were strangled almost at birth by public incomprehension and its corollary, government's refusal to support art the way any good government should. As the memories of musicians and concertgoers fade, and as the evidence once available on numerous phonograph recordings passes into the dusty hands of institutional archives, some account of the recent musical past we did indeed have seems necessary in the interests of recapturing our lost history and of understanding our extravagantly ballyhooed but nonetheless unanchored present.

In reality, serious music in America was in pretty good shape at the end of World War II. Even new composition, the notorious Achilles' heel of the art in the years since the Great War, was in a tolerable way. The finest European masters living outside the Soviet prison house, among them Paul Hindemith, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg, were hard at work in our own country writing music which was eagerly awaited, even when not eagerly applauded. Béla Bartók, though already terminally ill, had written the *Concerto for Orchestra,* perhaps his most accessible masterpiece, as recently as 1943; Darius Milhaud, the genial French *provocateur,* was busy writing his French-sounding music from the coastal wilds of Mills College in California. While the presence of such giants was doubtless pleasing to our national *amour propre* and important to the vitality of our musical life, it goes without saying that they were not here as a result of the cultural attractiveness of the United States. They were here rather because of the monstrous behavior of Hitler and the Nazis, and because of America's role as the Arsenal of Democracy.

But the health of American musical composition was in fact not simply a matter of composition *in* America. It is important that in 1945 there were flourishing on these shores at least two schools of domestic composition, one nativist and the other rather more internationalist in expression. The most famous figure of the nativist

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school was Aaron Copland, whose dance scores *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944)—not to mention the openly patriotic *Lincoln Portrait* and the *Fanfare for the Common Man* (both 1942)—have come to define what it means for a serious composer to be demonstrably American. In these works Copland integrated the heritage of domestic jazz and folk music with the European symphonic tradition. In 1945 there were great hopes entertained too for the Oklahoma-born Roy Harris, whose Third Symphony (1937) and *Folksong Symphony* (1940) were attempts to write music in an American style. Virgil Thomson was another figure of impeccably European associations who was counted among the musical proclaimers of America. Thomson had found his way back to a kind of artistic nationalism via the improbable route of collaborating (in Paris) with Gertrude Stein on *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927-28), a mostly hymn-tune-like opera written for Negro singers. His scores for two films by Pare Lorentz, *The Plough that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), remain milestones of a kind of genre writing familiar in the Central European music of Smetana and Dvořák. In this context, a word must be said also for Douglas Moore, whose opera *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1938) was perhaps the most successful operatic setting of a regional subject composed up to that time.

There was a good deal more going on in American music composition in 1945 than the emergence of our first successful nativists. Though now almost forgotten, Walter Piston and Howard Hanson—the first via a neo-classicism acquired from the famous French composition teacher Nadia Boulanger and the second via a Nordic Romanticism derived from his Scandinavian forebears—epitomized the ability of native-born composers to write authentically in an international style. Samuel Barber, that proud product of the great days in the 1930s of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, was then best known for his melodically touching *Adagio for Strings* (1936). In Arturo Toscanini's performances and recording of the work, it reached—and touched—millions of listeners who, in the fashion of Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, would have been surprised indeed to be told that they were being moved by American music. Roger Sessions (who passed away just this year at the age of eighty-eight) had by 1945 achieved major standing among musical intellectuals as a cerebral composer remarkable for the individuality of his achievement, despite the influences of both Stravinsky and Schoenberg.

In describing the state of American composition in 1945, it would be a mistake to lose sight of how easy it was for nativist figures, along with their slightly younger colleagues, to jump back and forth across the relatively thin line separating nativist from more cosmopolitan composers. By 1945, Copland had written such notably non-folk-sounding works as the *Piano Variations* (1930) and the Violin Sonata (1943); Harris had written a quantity of non-programmatic chamber music. In this regard, the career of William Schuman is instructive. Though in 1945 Schuman was best known for his jazzy *American Festival Overture* (1939), his Third Symphony (1941) manages to sound recognizably American in its melodic and rhythmic contours without any overt American musical references. Like Copland, Schuman turned his talent to the dance, writing the gripping score for Martha Graham's *Undertow* (1945).

Schuman, the youngest of the composers referred to above, was thirty-five at the close of World War II. Much younger than Schuman was the prodigy Leonard Bernstein, already famous as a composer in 1945 for parlaying the enormously successful ballet music from *Fancy Free* (1944) into the even more successful Broadway musical *On the Town* at the close of the same year. To be mentioned along with Bernstein is his late (and somewhat older) friend and mentor Marc Blitzstein. It was Blitzstein's curious, though hardly negligible, achievement to have written two much-talked-about, antithetical works: the earlier, Communist Party-

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inspired musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1936), which in the course of urging a proletarian revolution mocked the American way of life; and the later, war-motivated *Airborne Symphony* (1945), which celebrated the bravery of the United States Army Air Force he had served with in England. Another composer who seemed to bridge the gap between serious and lighter styles was Morton Gould, whose *Lincoln Legend* (1941) predated Copland's treatment of the same subject by one year.

There was another approach in 1945 to the composition of American music, an approach which was apparently of little moment at the time but which in later years began to seem the manifestation of a quintessentially national way of doing things. This approach later became famous—if not infamous—as the American musical avant-garde. Three avant-garde figures, each of them marginal to the composition scene of the day, come immediately to mind. The first, little known then and only later to assume symbolic importance for his dissonantal and anarchic music, was the eccentric and lonely Yankee Charles Ives, then seventy-one; though Ives had ceased composing some years before, he began to acquire a cult reputation among the devotees of new music as early as 1939, with the performance of his *Concord Sonata* (1911-15) in New York's Town Hall by pianist John Kirkpatrick. The second avant-garde figure was the Californian Henry Cowell, the inventor, as early as 1912 (in *The Tides of Manaunaun*), of "tone clusters," groups of contiguous notes on the piano struck with palm, clenched fist, or extended forearm; by 1945 Cowell had become a guru of what he called, in the title of a 1930 book, "New Musical Resources." The third figure in this avant-garde trio was John Cage. This half-whimsical, half-demonic figure was already known by war's end as the inventor of the prepared piano, an instrument so altered by the insertion of foreign objects amongst its strings that the resulting sonority struck listeners as reminiscent of nothing so much as a quaint Balinese gamelan orchestra. By 1939, Cage had given early evidence of his intention to abandon music itself as the raw material for composition in his *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, a work for muted piano, cymbal, and two variable-speed phonograph turntables.

The bridge between music as composition and music as performance is of course necessary, natural, and ubiquitous. It is not surprising that the relatively happy state of American music composition in 1945—the leaner products of the avant-garde aside—had its corollary in performance. As in composition, American music performance had been enriched for some years by the migration of the greatest European talents: among conductors, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Pierre Monteux, Fritz Reiner, Arturo Toscanini, and Bruno Walter; among instrumentalists, Adolf Busch, Robert Casadesus, Vladimir Horowitz, Wanda Landowska, Arthur Rubinstein, Artur Schnabel, Rudolf Serkin, Joseph Szigeti, and the members of the Budapest Quartet; among singers, Alexander Kipnis, Lotte Lehmann, Friedrich Schorr, and Elisabeth Schumann. All were exerting major influence in America as performers and in many cases as teachers.

Then, as now, the focus of performing life was on the small group of great American orchestras. Such ensembles as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Philadelphia Orchestra had become of world class as long ago as the 1920s. In the late 1930s and early 1940s two newer orchestras, the Cleveland Orchestra (founded in 1918) and the NBC Symphony Orchestra (founded in 1937) began to attain the prestige of their older colleagues. The quality of these great orchestras ought not to blind us to the very real distinction at the time of the orchestras of Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, St. Louis, and San Francisco. Records of important repertory from these groups testify to their high level of playing.

The music directors of these important orchestras were not all foreign nationals taking shelter in the United States from the European storm. In fact, the conductors

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of the most important old-line orchestras—Serge Koussevitsky in Boston, Artur Rodzinski in New York, and Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia—had become American residents *before* Hitler's rise in Germany. Leopold Stokowski, who conducted the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1912 to 1936 and who exerted perhaps the most important influence on the mass perception of orchestral music in the United States before the war, had been a domestic resident since well before World War I.

Given the importance that must be attached to the *writing* as well as to the performance of music, the work of two of these conductors deserves to be singled out for its contribution to contemporary composition in general and to American composition in particular. Stokowski enthusiastically introduced new works in Philadelphia to an essentially staid audience, and Koussevitsky gladly performed the same service for American music in equally staid Boston. Their achievements along this line make up a golden chapter in the otherwise troubled relations between twentieth-century composers and performers.

Any account of the condition of American music in 1945 would be incomplete without a sketch of the situation in opera. Then, as now, the Metropolitan, with its secure base of patronage in the world of New York society and its weekly Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, was the leader among our opera companies. Times were difficult for the Met during the war, owing to the repertory's dependence on Italian and German singers. The Met dealt with this problem by hiring American singers in large numbers, some of whom went on to become stars, even after the coming of peace made international artistic travel once again possible: the names of Jan Peerce, Eleanor Steber, Risë Stevens, Helen Traubel, Richard Tucker, and Leonard Warren remain high on lists of the Met's great singers. It should also be mentioned that the Met at this time was in the habit of using the services of great conductors, including Sir Thomas Beecham, George Szell, and Bruno Walter.

From the winter of 1944 on, the Met was no longer the only opera in New York. The founding of the New York City Opera did more than provide "dollar opera" for the masses; it also made possible an all-American counterweight to the rather more pretentious and internationalist Met. The fulfillment of the City Opera's promise to produce contemporary repertory, both European and American, was still some years in the future; what was clear from the beginning was that opera—even the European chestnuts—could be "Americanized" with American singers without losing dramatic conviction or musical charm.

Outside New York, grand opera was restricted to San Francisco. A social base similar to that of the Metropolitan Opera's had committed itself to the support of a full-scale resident company. The war had treated the San Francisco Opera no less harshly than it had the Met, but with the end of the war the company was poised to exploit the availability of a whole new generation of European artists hitherto isolated in enemy countries. American singers, too, found San Francisco a hospitable environment for their talents. Elsewhere in the United States, operatic excitement was provided by a rise in staged college and university productions, often under the resident leadership of musicians born and trained in Europe.

The move to American performers was hardly restricted to singers. By the end of the war, the careers of such successful instrumentalists as Leon Fleisher, Eugene Istomin, William Kapell, and Isaac Stern were launched. Leonard Bernstein's success as a composer was matched by the huge impression he was making as a conductor in the wake of his spectacular debut with the New York Philharmonic in 1943.

The audience for all these products of American musical life was not restricted to those who attended live performances. Radio broadcasts of symphony concerts were flourishing, with national leadership being taken by the commercially sponsored Sunday broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic and the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Other

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major orchestras were regularly carried over radio; on the West Coast, for instance, the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic alternated weekly one-hour Sunday-evening broadcasts, commercially sponsored by the Standard Oil Company of California. CBS regularly presented American music, played by its staff musicians and conducted by composer Bernard Herrman. In addition, many local radio stations, among them WOR and WQXR in New York and KPO in San Francisco, employed staff musicians to play regular concerts of serious music, both pre-twentieth-century and contemporary.

With the large audience for radio broadcasts went a healthy market for phonograph recordings of American orchestras. At war's end no fewer than *seven* domestic orchestras were under contract to major American companies. The Boston, San Francisco, and NBC orchestras were employed by RCA Victor, the New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland orchestras by CBS/Columbia. In addition, both companies hired pick-up groups of skilled orchestral players to record with such conductors as Stokowski.

Mention should also be made of the relatively halcyon state of music criticism at this time. New York, of course, had many more newspapers than it has now. In addition to *The New York Times* and the *Herald-Tribune* in the morning, there were the *World-Telegram* and the *Journal-American* in the afternoon. All of these papers carried extensive coverage of musical events. At the *Times,* Olin Downes actually influenced the state of the musical repertory, the last *Times* critic to have done so; his championing of Sibelius was important in elevating that composer to near-classic status in America. At the *Tribune,* Virgil Thomson was quite simply the best critic in the country, owing to both his perspicacity and prose style; indeed, he was the best critic to have graced an American newspaper within living memory. Across the country, several critics, among them Claudia Cassidy in Chicago, Alfred Frankenstein in San Francisco, Max de Schauensee in Philadelphia, and John Rosenfield in Dallas, established themselves as influential molders of regional and even national musical opinion. There was a flourishing music criticism in magazines as well; musical events were regularly covered not just in such trade organs as the *Musical Courier* and *Musical America* but even in *The Nation.*

Music education too was flourishing. The Curtis Institute was continuing to accept only the most gifted young students, entirely on scholarship. At the Eastman School of Music in Rochester composer Howard Hanson was making his mark as a tireless conductor of American music. At Juilliard in New York, composer William Schùman had just become the school's president, and was about to embark upon a radical reformulation, the first in American cultural history, of the entire music-theory curriculum. In such an out-of-the-way place as Denton, Texas, Wilfred Bain (with the assistance of piano teacher Silvio Scionti) was making the music school of North Texas State College an exciting adventure in the artistic development of an entire geographical region. In general, everywhere in America the great boom in music education was beginning, with enrollments rising and faculty members in demand. Not only was the situation healthy in professional music training: music education in the nation's elementary schools properly stressed such important ways of learning the first steps to great music as sight-reading and sight-singing.

Finally, something must be said about the state of patronage for music. Still close enough to the nineteenth century to have some idea of *noblesse oblige* and the Gospel of Wealth, the very rich counted it a privilege to support great musical institutions. There was support from them too for contemporary composers—through, for instance, The League of Composers in New York and its quarterly review *Modern Music.* Just as important, these community leaders were often interested in unobtrusive patronage of highly gifted individuals; in 1945 in San Francisco, for example, both Leon Fleisher and Isaac Stern were the recipients of continuing and generous private philanthropy.

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Altogether, the impression one has when looking back at the condition of American music in 1945 is of an art proudly ensconced in the pantheon of classic civilization and in the intellectual world of contemporary cultural art. There was Stravinsky's historic association with Diaghilev and Cocteau, and Schoenberg's relation with Thomas Mann in the brilliant European emigré intellectual community of Southern California during the war; there was Copland's connection to Harold Clurman in theater and Agnes De Mille in dance, Schuman's work for Martha Graham, and Virgil Thomson's collaboration with Gertrude Stein. Whether one chose to look to the past or at the present, at European emigrés or native Americans, music and musicians seemed central to the life of the mind.

It seems clear even from this summary that the mood in American music at the end of 1945 was one of hope. The hope was that our country could produce an independent, autonomous musical life which would take its full place on the stage of world history, both in the sense of adding to the great music already written in Europe and in the sense of providing new, recognizably American music and performers capable of defining the idea of a serious art. Forty years have now passed since 1945. After one has made every necessary allowance for the nostalgia and the fog to which even the best memories—and perhaps especially the memories of the best times—are subject, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that we live today in a new musical world, a world vastly different and in many significant ways less rich and certainly less solid.

By the early 1960s, various problems of serious musical development—or rather of its lack—began to appear. In 1961, when Virgil Thomson came to write a new preface for *The State of Music* (1939), his lively exposition of what it was like to be a serious composer in America, he found that while the world really was different from what it had been two decades earlier the art only looked like it had changed:

> Mostly what has changed in twenty years is the economic and political background. These changes, however, are so tremendous that almost everybody under thirty-five is dazzled by them, unable to see through them or around them, tends in consequence to see today's world of art as full of novelty . . . . [W]hen we see them, as we do today in music, painting, and poetry, mistaking for deep originality and for invention diluted versions of our century's earlier masters (who really were radical), then one does feel moved to remind them that we too, when young, had an intellectual life and that an inflated market is merely an inflated market.

What Thomson was referring to in these rather guarded words was the spectacular rise of an avant-garde in serious composition, an avant-garde which prided itself upon breaking the vessels that had previously contained musical art. Thomson himself called these vessels "organization, flexibility, spaciousness, and expressive variety"; he went on to remark that in music since 1914 "there has been no further structural growth, only constriction."

Difficult though it may be to make such distinctions in practice, it is nonetheless necessary to establish the general principle that after 1945 musical composition, not just in the United States but in the whole Western world, separated into two wings: modernism, including its direct descendants; and an avant-garde that attempted not just to create new music but to redefine music as an aesthetic enterprise. In Europe numerous living practitioners of modernism—composers like Kodály in Hungary, Dallapiccola in Italy, Martin in Switzerland, and Honegger and Poulenc in France—continued to write, as they had before, in styles which, though fully based upon developments in twentieth-century composition, remained predicated upon the existence of a general music-loving audience. In the United States, the major figures of American composition—Copland, Schuman, Bernstein, and others—likewise continued to write a new-sounding music which remained

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within traditional parameters. Of all these composers, only Bernstein found a large audience for his postwar music, and that audience was only attracted to his works for Broadway.

The leading American composers of the mid-1940s were joined by colleagues whose reputations were to be made later in the same decade and in the first years of the 1950s. Merely to list some of these artists is to recollect much beautiful music which still has not found its proper place in our performers' repertories: William Bergsma, David Diamond, Ross Lee Finney, Andrew Imbrie, Leon Kirchner, Peter Mennin, Vincent Persichetti, Ned Rorem, and Hugo Weisgall. Of this generation, only Elliott Carter has managed to stake out an assured position in our concert life; sadly, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Carter's numerous performances owe more to the credit performers hope to earn for negotiating their way through the transcendental difficulties of his music than to any real audience comprehension of the works themselves.

In the field of opera, there have been two composers since 1945 who have in fact managed to write works whose surefire audience appeal is responsible for widespread performances. Of this pair, the more successful has been Gian Carlo Menotti, who, although Italian by birth, was educated in America and made his home here. His string of hits has included *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947), *The Consul* (1950), and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951). The other successful operatic composer is Carlisle Floyd, whose chief success has been the early *Susannah* (1955); his subsequent operas are *Wuthering Heights* (1958), *Of Mice and Men* (1969), and *Willie Stark* (1981). It is a measure of the limited nature of these composers' achievements, and also of the great gulf which now exists between intellectual musical life and generally accessible new music, that their work is today without any major standing among serious composers and performers.

The real action in composition for many years after 1945 was, of course, with the avant-garde. The two streams of this movement, in the United States as in Europe, took widely differing positions on whether music should be a free or an ordered activity. In Europe, Karlheinz Stockhausen charted a confident course from totally controlled tape compositions to almost totally improvised performance events. Pierre Boulez, by contrast, extended the implications of Schoenberg's (and Anton Webern's) twelve-tone practices to other, non-pitch-related, components of music. In the United States, John Cage spoke for freedom, carrying the cause as far as writing his infamous *4'33"* (1952), a work of pure silence for any combination of instruments in which only duration and absolute silence are specified. Cage's antithesis was Milton Babbitt, who managed to make twin careers as the composer of carefully planned works of extreme desiccation and as the writer of arcane and forbiddingly self-confident articles on new music. He has the further distinction of having written an essay, a classic avant-garde definition of independence from the audience, entitled, "Who Cares if You Listen?" (1958).

The names of some of the followers of this avant-garde should be mentioned. It must be borne in mind that several of these figures managed to leap back and forth across the divide which, one might have thought, separated the practitioners of freedom from the advocates of order. Whether these composers preferred the undisciplined concocting of sounds or the exact formulation of sounds which impressed only their inventors as music, their names describe an era which would now seem past in every way, were it not for the damage it did (and continues to do in the academy): Earle Brown, Charles Dodge, Morton Feldman, Dick Higgins, Lejaren Hiller, Alvin Lucier, Otto Luening, Max Mathews, Pauline Oliveros, Morton Subotnick, and Vladimir Ussachevsky. Nor, I suppose, should the name of Charlotte Moorman be left off this roll of avant-garde honor; her contributions to the art of topless cello play-

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ing provided an easy transition to the present generation of performance artists like Laurie Anderson and David Byrne, who compel admiration for their ability to make a success, onstage and in recording, of their musical shortcomings.

By the mid-1960s it was becoming clear that the avant-garde, understood as an assault on the sensibilities even of those who might otherwise appreciate an attack on tradition, was running out of steam. Even such a figure as Boulez, the very *beau idéal* of the refusal to compromise with the philistines, began at this time to cultivate the international conducting career which would bring him to the New York Philharmonic in 1969, where he was a propagandist for the music not just of the pathfinders of the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern), but also of such a hitherto despised nineteenth-century romantic as Franz Liszt. Just how far Boulez had gone in giving up his devotion to the present may be gathered from the title of another essay sacred to the postwar avant-garde mythology, his "Schoenberg is Dead" (1952).

In American composition the result of the weakening of the avant-garde was a desire to write music that a new, youthful, politically and socially aware audience might like. The candidates for the Pied Piper of the young varied. George Crumb wrote sensually appealing sound-effects music, depending for appeal on "in" subjects (such as the whale) and texts (such as the poetry of García Lorca). George Rochberg wrote in a neo-Romantic style, prompting even such a hard-hearted observer of new music as the *Times*'s Harold C. Schonberg to think of Brahms, and to like what he heard. More convincing as descendants of the old avant-garde were Steve Reich and Philip Glass, who wrote a music which embraced the trendy art-world aesthetic of minimalism and the popular rock-music aesthetic of simple-minded harmonic repetitiveness. While the career of Reich has seemed to wane in recent years, that of Glass has waxed in opera houses here and in Germany. Neither composer has succeeded in winning any audience at all from traditional music lovers or from the most respected performers of traditional music.

A new breed of composer has recently come to the fore, writing what we are told is a fresh kind of music. Perhaps the most convenient, if certainly not the most accurate, name for it is "New Romanticism," the phrase the New York Philharmonic used for its 1983 festival of contemporary music. The music assembled for this festival by the composer Jacob Druckman, the Philharmonic's adviser in these matters, seemed neither romantic, lacking any capacity to stir listeners' hearts, nor new, failing to reveal any fresh compositional voices. Even David Del Tredici's composition based on *Alice in Wonderland*, one of the more applauded pieces of the festival, seemed like warmed over *Salome*. Elsewhere in the Philharmonic concerts, American music was represented by many of the old familiar names from the avant-garde: George Crumb, Lukas Foss, Donald Martino, George Rochberg, Frederic Rzewski, Morton Subotnick, Charles Wuorinen, and Druckman himself. In a further reminder of the good old days, loudspeakers and electronic consoles, those jolly elements of the most refined avant-garde taste, were much in evidence. There were also at least two composers—John Adams and Nicholas Thorne—whose unbuttoned vulgarity in writing music based upon the hoariest of stock romantic clichés simply defied the imagination. Significantly, by far the best piece on these programs—*Colloquies* (1979)—was by William Schuman, a representative of the 1945 generation. When the Philharmonic repeated the festival in 1984, the superior quality of the earlier American music was underlined again, a major work being Elliott Carter's Brass Quintet, another survivor of the best days of our older modernism. It must also be remarked that the Philharmonic, for whatever reason, did not choose to repeat its festival of new music in 1985.

The same dubious state of affairs obtains in opera. The most traditional producers of grand opera in America today—the Metro-

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politan in New York, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the San Francisco Opera—have pretty much turned their backs on new and old American works, as well as on difficult, post-Berg works in general.

The evidence of this retrograde disposition on the part of great operatic institutions is all around us. The Met, for example, seems happy to let the deadline for delivery on its two new commissions—one from the musically complaisant John Corigliano and the other from Druckman—be extended into the unforeseeable future. In the meantime, it is having the greatest difficulty making up its mind to produce Arnold Schoenberg's classic (if little known) *Moses und Aron* (1932). The Chicago Lyric seems content, under the leadership of Ardis Krainik, to stick to the mainline repertory of the nineteenth century, with an occasional token lunge at the contemporary. In San Francisco, the supercession of longtime director (and conductor) Kurt Herbert Adler by erstwhile record company executive Terence McEwen has meant a return to safe repertory very much in the style of Chicago's. At the New York City Opera, though Beverly Sills's present summer season ventures no further than Puccini's *Turandot,* the fall season does include the New York premiere of an American work, Dominick Argento's *Casanova.* (Tellingly, *Casanova* was commissioned not by the City Opera but by the Minnesota Opera, where it received its first performance.)

There is undoubtedly a great amount of opera production going on around the country, some of it even including new American operas. Much publicity accompanies the performance of these works, and seasoned observers of the operatic scene testify to a new attitude of pleasurable reception by the audiences in attendance. The only rub in this happy story is that this music has such a thin effect to make *qua* music; this verdict applies in much the same way to such otherwise different recent works as Stephen Paulus's *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* Leonard Bernstein's *A Quiet Place* (1983), and Thea Musgrave's *Harriet, the Woman Called Moses* (1985). As for the contribution of experimental music theatre, so widely trumpeted just a short while ago, little of any interest, save for *Einstein on the Beach* (1975), the collaboration of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass, seems to have arisen to affect even the wish lists of opera houses and fans.

Despite all the inadequacies of the current music scene, there is indeed a new spirit abroad in music, a spirit of accommodation to the perceived failure of so much recent composition. This spirit is evident not just in the effort of a popularly oriented former avant-gardist like Philip Glass to find a mass public. It is evident in the rise of a California school of composition which, as in the music of Robert Erickson played at an Alice Tully Hall concert this past spring, seemingly attempts to provide a music to enjoy hot tubs by. It is also evident in the relationship of much less flamboyant creative figures to the traditional performing institutions which now either commission them for single works or employ them in residencies.

A fascinating look at the way composition is now increasingly being approached was provided this past winter by a live broadcast of a Minnesota Orchestra concert. The chief attraction of the concert was the world premiere of *Symphony: Watermusic,* a large-scale work evidently based on images of Minnesota's many lakes and written by the orchestra's composer-in-residence, Libby Larsen. Despite its ambitious scoring—including (according to the broadcast commentary) an expanded percussion ensemble made up of vibraphone, triangle, tam-tam, bell tree, wind chimes, bass drum, snare drum, tubular bells, cymbals, marimba, crotal, chimes, tom-toms, temple blocks, bongos, sleigh bells, tenor drum, orchestra bells, wind machine, harp, piano, and celesta—the work itself at its best moments did no more than echo Thomson's earlier, and vastly more successful, attempts to write a quasi-original, folk-like music. At its less successful moments, it sounded like note-spinning done to accompany a nonexistent nature film.

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The chief interest of this broadcast concert did not lie in Libby Larsen's composition itself, however. It rather emerged in a lengthy intermission interview she gave after the performance. Because what she said seems to capture so exactly the mood in which so much serious music is being made today, it deserves quotation at length:

> *Interviewer:* There is often the soul-searching that a composer goes through as far as whether his or her music is up-to-date . . . . Is that consideration of any importance to you as a composer?
>
> *Libby Larsen:* I don't worry about the relative forwardness- or backwardness-looking of my music. What I care very much about, and what many composers I'm working with are taking into account, is that I consider as part of the creative process the audience who is going to hear the piece, and what I'm taking into account, [is] the fact that music lives in the moment, it's performed in a single moment and an audience is there that moment to hear the music. And so I don't write music that may be understood a hundred years from now. I write music very much wanting to have it understood now.

It is difficult to disagree with this statement of liberation from the compulsive desire of composers over the past several decades always to be with the latest trends. But Libby Larsen, in being equally clear about how she intends to accomplish this goal of having her music understood now, seems to transform the kind of effort people used to direct toward choosing a style into identifying a market:

> I think a composer these days has a tremendous challenge to decide what his or her style and audience is going to be, so a composer who is being trained academically . . . can make a choice as to whether he or she is going to elect to have an audience of a very small number, that being one that is interested in the process of composing, whether the piece is serially constructed, whether the piece is based in tonality or not, in other words, caring much more about thinking about the piece rather than hearing it, and that's a very small number of people for a given piece . . . . What I've chosen is to make my living, if possible, and to write my music and create my art in the concert situation.

The difficulty with such egoistic, career-oriented activity is that it must justify itself at some point by reference to an external good. In the case of music composition over the last century and more, that good has been seen to be the education of a growing—and democratically constituted—public in the nature of music and its place in a wider world of high culture. For Libby Larsen, such a goal seems inappropriate:

> . . . the whole notion . . . is a myth, that the orchestra has a duty to educate the audience concerning contemporary music. It's the duty to educate that's the operative phrase here. That's a phrase that's tossed around a lot among concert-going and concert-giving groups, both chamber groups and orchestra groups: we have a duty to educate. As an audience member myself, I don't particularly come to a concert to be educated. I come to a concert to listen to music and make up my own mind. And, given that, and translating my own feeling as an audience member over to the general audience, I have come to think that it's not important for an orchestra to play what's considered to be an intellectual masterpiece of the twentieth century in order to educate an audience. It's important that the orchestra play that masterpiece because it works on a program, so that the total program has the final outcome similar to what an audience would get if it were to hear an all-Mozart program or an all-baroque classics program . . . . The idea of duty to educate becomes secondary, the idea to put together good listening experiences for the audience becomes primary, and the attitude switches from slightly pejorative—we must educate you—to very optimistic: we want to give you the best work we can.

It is possible to have sympathy for the composer's plight in dealing with an audi-

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ence well trained in the recent past to be wary of contemporary composers bearing musical offerings. Put another way, it is quite natural for the composer to wish to appear before the public as muse rather than scourge. It is also possible to appreciate the immense amount of intellectual and emotional upheaval which is involved in cutting one's ties to the notion that anything an audience likes must, *ipso facto,* be bad. But even granting all this, it would still seem a mistake, in reacting against the excesses of the musical avant-garde, to give up the idea of education and to replace it entirely with a gospel of amusement. There is more in music education, after all, than delivering an unpleasant and unwanted message to an unwilling audience. Its purpose is the teaching of civilization and beauty; the need exists all the more after the misfires in music composition over the last forty years.

There is another reason why the composer and those who serve him must not lightly give up their duty to educate an audience. The arts—including music—form a relationship with the audience based upon two principles: that of education, and that of entertainment. In the absence of entertainment, a condition certainly familiar to the musical avant-garde, education becomes impossible (and even seems like an unwarranted assertion of arrogance). But in the absence of education, all that is left is entertainment—the mindless pursuit by the audience of empty satisfactions and trivial delights, and by the artist of glamorous success and bloated fame.

Here, I think, is the key to understanding what has happened to our musical life in recent years, and to knowing just where we are today. Where we are is in an era of purposeless performance, an era in which performance entertains and does nothing more than entertain. The continuing shortage of significant new works, most pronounced in opera but equally apparent in orchestral and instrumental music, has thrown the weight of musical activity onto the performance of already validated masterpieces. The full horror of this situation has been masked in America for many years by two extraordinary factors: the existence of an almost inconceivably large corpus of great music going back three hundred years and more, and the fortuitous arrival of great European performers on our shores just before World War II. There is hardly any need at this point to preach the virtues of the composers from before the time of Bach to World War I. But we do sometimes forget the performer's role in bringing this music to us. In a very real sense Landowska brought us the world's greatest performances of Bach and Scarlatti, Walter brought us Mozart, Toscanini Beethoven, Schnabel Schubert (and Beethoven too!), Rubinstein Chopin, Monteux the French masters and Stravinsky, Adolf Busch and Rudolf Serkin chamber music, and Lotte Lehmann *Lieder.* For many years we enjoyed nothing less than an unparalleled golden age of music performance. Sadly, this golden age is over.

By contrast, what we have now in music performance are careers without achievement and glamour without content. The present situation of two of our historically greatest orchestras—the New York Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra—is a case in point: both are playing badly, and are undergoing crises of musical leadership, with administrators and patrons so paralyzed by their knowledge of how dire the situation is that the necessary corrective measure of looking for new music directors seemingly cannot be undertaken. That these orchestras should seriously consider appointing American conductors—or at least full-time American residents—to lead them appears to be unthinkable. In general, the lot of American-born conductors still seems miserable, with most major conducting opportunities closed off to them on the grounds of their supposed lack of distinction and of box-office appeal.

It is true we have had some famous instrumentalists among us. The most famous of these was pianist Van Cliburn, whose victory in the 1958 Tchaikowsky Competition in Moscow (another sign, by the way, of the continuing primacy of foreign influence in

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our performing life) propelled him into the greatest career an American-born instrumentalist has ever known. There can be little doubt that Cliburn's career had foundered by the mid-1960s, due to the public's insatiable appetite for newer stars and the artist's own inability to say no to the wrong kind of success. Among thriving instrumentalists at the present time, there is the violinist Itzhak Perlman, whose public image as the Luciano Pavarotti of the violin seems securely established. An American resident (though born in Israel), Perlman is unique in the history of violin playing for being the most famous virtuoso of the day without at the same time having had any effect on the playing of other violinists, either in style or repertory. The same can be said of the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, who now seems well on the way to becoming for the cello what Perlman has been for the violin. No American keyboard players have reached the unquestioned eminence of Perlman and Ma, or of violinist Pinchas Zukerman; no domestic pianist since William Kapell has seemed both truly American and equally at home in both traditional romantic and recent repertory.

We are often told of the revolution supposedly brought to performances of older music, and to our perception of that music, by the booming vogue for "authentic" performances on "original" instruments. But even the best of these performances seem to suggest that the old adage about failed pianists taking up the organ applies with at least equal force to the harpsichord, the fortepiano, unaltered string instruments, and original woodwind and brass instruments. Interestingly enough, one of the most talked-about recent performances in a semi-authentic mode—that of Handel's opera *Semele* at Carnegie Hall this past winter—featured a triumphant appearance of a great American singer, contralto Marilyn Horne. Horne's triumph, at least to this listener, stemmed as much from her Camp portrayal as from her undoubted vocal excellence. Horne's success as a Handelian notwithstanding, it is difficult to overlook the fact that the authentic-performance movement is headquartered not in the United States but in England and on the Continent; when the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and public radio wished to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of Bach's birth with period performances, they did not do so with American forces but instead brought Christopher Hogwood and his Academy of Ancient Music in from London.

Where composition and performance lead, all the rest will follow; where they falter, everything else will falter as well. The complete abdication by major American recording companies to their European betters is a story too well known to require much comment; it is enough to remark that no American orchestra now makes more than isolated recordings for an American company. Rumor has it that almost all American orchestras, in order to record at all, must themselves pay the musicians. American soloists do in fact continue to record, but not necessarily here. Columbia/CBS has just announced that the new series of orchestral recordings with jazz/classical trumpeter Wynton Marsalis will take place not with an American ensemble but rather with the Philharmonia Orchestra of London, led by Finnish conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen. Similarly, the recent and much-acclaimed Mozart concerto recordings played and conducted by Murray Perahia, the most successful young American pianist of the past two decades, were recorded in England, with the English Chamber Orchestra.

The situation of music criticism—even according to the music critics themselves—is not good. The ability to write interesting, even exciting, criticism for the wide music-loving public seems a thing of the past. Instead we now have two unsatisfactory kinds of music journalism. The first kind, at home in our best newspapers and *The New Yorker,* is infused by academic musicology and ends up striking the reader as overdependent on gleanings from the best reference books; the second, all too prevalent across the country, fills the columns of newspapers with an unattractive combination of musical and literary incompetence.

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Music education, too, seems in a bad way. Though the past forty years have seen an enormous expansion of professional music training in this country, there has been no corresponding effort to train a general audience in the basic knowledge and skills of great Western music so necessary to go beyond appreciation to understanding. Instead of a disciplined curriculum there is the cult of the "arts experience," the passive witnessing by schoolchildren and teachers alike of exotic activities of professionals brought in to strut their moment on the stage—and then disappear. The result of not teaching the most basic skills to schoolchildren is by now obvious to every musician: a gradual deterioration of the sophistication of the musical public and a marked decline in the size of the core audience on which day-to-day artistic life depends. Professional training itself shows every sign of being conducted in an atmosphere of basic uncertainty as to whether jobs can ever be found for the thousands of music graduates turned out each year; student populations now seem to be dropping, and increasingly a good teacher is entirely defined as one who can recruit students. Unfortunately, the one area in which music trainees might find employment—that of teaching substantive material in elementary and high schools to every child, not just to those children who will become professionals—is mostly despised as an unrewarding and unfulfilling activity.

Patronage, too, for all the happy statistics of dollars given being ground out, is at a low ebb. The committed private patron, willing to contribute large sums for operating expenses on an annual basis, is in vanishingly short supply. Every musical institution —including the greatest—now knows the very real difficulty of finding board members who will give money, and who know enough to know why and to what they are giving. The recent emphasis by arts institutions on corporate contributions has only demonstrated the interest of these funders in creating favorable publicity for the corporation rather than in providing basic support for an ongoing musical life.

As the *quality* of patronage declines, fears naturally arise about the future *quantity* of support. The situation is thus ripe for "development directors," "marketing specialists," and their like. The following material, quoted from a recent press release of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, shows just how far off the artistic track today's fundraisers will go in pursuit of what they see as today's new breed—or perhaps, given the release's shift in interest from art to food, bread—of patron:

> William B. Graham, the prominent civic leader and highly respected industrialist, was re-elected to the presidency of Lyric Opera of Chicago's board of directors at its unique annual meeting, which took place this year on Wednesday evening, May 1, when some 400 of the world-renowned non-profit Chicago opera-producing organization's voting members (the voting privilege prerequisite is a yearly contribution of $250 or more) came together on the huge stage of the Civic Opera House to be wined and dined in gourmet fashion, while seated at tables set 'gainst the background of the strikingly lighted stage decor for Handel's "Samson," which is to be presented in the coming fall-winter season. Only following the dinner, did the conventional business of an annual corporation meeting begin, and as soon as those deliberations concluded, the assembled "stockholders" became the audience for a mini-concert, presented by soprano Susan Dunn, fast-rising star in the opera firmament. Thus, it can be understood why the press has rightly written that Lyric's annual gathering of its top contributors is "hands down, the world's most glamorous corporate conclave."
>
> At the cocktail hour which preceded the "main event," hors d'oeuvres were served along with drinks in the foyer of the opera house, and those goodies included Country Style Pâté Fingers, garnished with Cornichons on Rye Bread; Tart Shells with Mushroom and Cheese Topping; Artichokes Parmesan; and Prosciutto-Wrapped Brie Cheese. Then the guests streamed down the aisles of the great theatre and onto the brilliantly illuminated

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stage, traversing the festooned ramps over the orchestra pit. Once everybody was seated at the pearl-gray-covered tables (giving the impression, when glimpsed from out in the house, that the diners might be performers in a grand opera banquet scene) service began with Cold Soup à la Prince from special containers on service plates, garnished with Three Circles of Skin-on Cucumber, Fresh Chives and sprinkled with Bay Shrimp. Then came Sautéed Breast of Chicken with Wing Bone (batted out, with the skin side scored and charred) set on Mushroom Rice Soubise (very moist) and crowned with Bernaise Velouté and Fresh Tarragon. "Veggies" consisted of Fresh Asparagus and Fresh Sugared Carrots with Sage. And, there were baskets of French Bread Melba Sticks, Miniature Twisted Rolls and Individual Butter Rosettes. The dessert delight was a Meringue Circle set on a deep pool of Fudge, topped with a Whole Strawberry, and there was Sabayon Sauce, too. Chairman for the evening's myriad special arrangements was Mrs. Frederick H. Prince and vice-chairman was Mrs. Theodore Tieken, Jr. CITICORP/CITIBANK, which again has underwritten the total costs of the lavish event, was represented by Howard C. Morgan, Senior Vice President and Senior Corporate Officer of Citicorp, and Thomas F. Barnum, Citicorp Division Executive responsible for Citicorp Diners Club.

And then, of course, there is government. In the twenty-year history of the National Endowment for the Arts, founded with such high expectations in 1965, there has been much talk of an increase in the number of institutions, artists, and audiences served, and remarkably little talk of the art produced which would not have existed save for the NEA's money. There is no point in assigning primary blame to the NEA for the present musical situation in the United States; the agency's authorizing legislation states (quite properly) that "no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence." But then the legislation goes on to find it "necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent." There can be no doubt that government help for the arts, under the conditions of our democracy, has not infringed upon "freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry." Unfortunately, the NEA's emphasis on "material conditions" has meant that over the past twenty years subsidies have largely gone to already successful institutions and administrators, and to those who serve the interests of these very interested parties.

This natural urge in Washington to serve large audiences, and to do so by encouraging institutions and artists to entertain these audiences, has been well-nigh irresistible; so, alas, has been the tendency (again a result of serving those interests which squawk the loudest) to discharge the NEA's duty to new art by support of an often mindless avant-garde. In the process, a great opportunity for basic education in the various arts has been lost. The result of this policy of neglect clearly has been a loss of comprehension by the audience of both twentieth-century works and even of classic masterpieces. It is significant that because of the increasingly rare ability to read music, today's lengthy concert program notes can rarely include vital notated musical examples. Given the changed national climate for serious education in general, the NEA now has a chance to reclaim its opportunity. It should do so at once.

And so, from the vantage point of a doubtful present, we look to the future of an art we dearly love. Is there no more to be said about the future than that "Music is a Growth Industry," which was *The New York Times*'s headline on a recent, especially tub-thumping article? Is there no more to be adduced in favor of music than its value for tourism, for urban redevelopment, and for enhanced recruitment possibilities for executives and their families?

There are indeed better arguments to be made for music, if not as a growth industry then at least as an art. First-class music is

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still being written; recent New York performances have shown the power of the music of two still not yet fully developed composers, the starkly modernist (in the best sense) George Tsontakis and the rather less severe Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Our great orchestras are still full of wonderful instrumentalists, lacking only serious, dedicated conductors to lead them. Our nation's schools still employ many teachers who only need to be asked to teach the elementary skills of making and understanding music. America's system of private philanthropy still has the resources to do the necessary job of supporting serious culture; the needed sophistication is a matter in the first instance of general education, which is, after all, a national specialty. More and more it seems that what we lack is not the ability to achieve a musical culture but rather the willingness to take music—and our achievements and our failures in it—seriously.

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Poetry and the return to seriousness

by Robert Richman

"THEY ARE FIXED AND FINISHED. They will never *surprise* anyone again," wrote the poet Louise Bogan in a letter of September 9, 1941 to Morton Dauwen Zabel, the critic and sometime editor of *Poetry* magazine. Bogan was referring to Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, but she could just as well have been talking about the other great modernist poets who published their most important works in the period between the wars—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. All of these poets continued to write, of course, in the postwar years, and their work was given close attention, as befits the work of classic figures. But for all of them their period of artistic innovation was clearly over, and Bogan was certainly right in that respect. What she hadn't anticipated, perhaps, was the extent to which they would continue to dominate the literary scene, for nearly all of them would be repeatedly invoked at one point or another to validate some new poetic impulse in the postwar period.

The figure who stood at the center of this development, occupying a position of unquestioned international prestige, was T. S. Eliot, at once a poet of immense distinction and a critic of vast influence. It was Eliot's criticism—incorporating, as it did, what he called "the mind of Europe"—that proved to be particularly important for the new generation of poets. Neither the experimentalism of Eliot's early verse nor the disembodied spirituality of the later proved to be a useful model for the new poets. But the criticism, especially the essays in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), with its vigorous and persuasive defense of the French Symbolists and the English Metaphysicals, had an enormous appeal for the poets coming of age in the Forties. For they, too, had reason to feel that the nature of reality was now highly paradoxical and could only be imperfectly understood. In the perspective of the Symbolist aesthetic, the poet was encouraged to represent the world and the feelings it engendered through an elaborate structure of metaphor and symbol—hence Eliot's famous theory of the "objective correlative"—and the Metaphysical style placed a premium on intellectual rigor. The result, in many cases, was a highly wrought formal poetry informed by a vivid sense of tradition.

The appeal of this Metaphysical-Symbolist style was reinforced by the increasing influence of the New Criticism, which gave to the internal structure of a poem a radical priority over anything that could be construed as a merely biographical or personal interest. In the new situation in which poetry found itself after the war, when more and more poets made their home in the university, a New Critical textbook such as *Understanding Poetry*—which Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren had first produced in 1938—came to play a role similar to that played by literary manifestos in an earlier generation. It offered a standard of taste as well as a guide to poetic practice.

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The values upheld in such an outlook were everywhere reflected in the best of the poets who began to publish after the war. Richard Wilbur was one of the youngest as well as one of the best of them. His first book of delicate and impeccably crafted poems, *The Beautiful Changes,* appeared in 1947 when Wilbur was twenty-five years old. Its title poem, with its elegant sobriety, nicely captures the poetic atmosphere of the period:

> One wading a Fall meadow finds on all sides
> The Queen Anne's Lace lying like lilies
> On water; it glides
> So from the walker, it turns
> Dry grass to a lake, as the slightest shade
> of you
> Valleys my mind in fabulous blue Lucernes.
>
> The beautiful changes as a forest is changed
> By a chameleon's tuning his skin to it;
> As a mantis, arranged
> On a green leaf, grows
> Into it, makes the leaf leafier, and proves
> Any greenness is deeper than anyone knows.

Wilbur's unabashed aestheticism is leavened by an attention to the concrete details of life that recalls Marianne Moore: the "beautiful" which Wilbur celebrates is that of the living world. The same combination of an easy earthiness with a fluent intellectual precision is found in such outstanding poems as "Cigales" and "Water Walker" (from *The Beautiful Changes*) and "Grasse: The Olive Trees" (from *Ceremony,* published in 1950).

Howard Nemerov, a year older than Wilbur, also published his first book, *The Image and the Law,* in 1947. It, too, was written in the Metaphysical-Symbolist mode. But Nemerov's poetry was more concentrated on irony, wit, and a greater ferocity of observation, as one can see, for example, in the poem called "Redeployment"—published in *Guide to the Ruins* (1950). The horror of war is remembered with the kind of stark, vivid images that recall the violence of Jacobean verse:

> They say the war is over. But water still
> Comes bloody from the taps, and my pet cat
> In his disorder vomits worms which crawl
> Swiftly away. Maybe they leave the house.
> These worms are white, and flecked with the
> cat's blood.
>
> The war may be over. I know a man
> Who keeps a pleasant souvenir, he keeps
> A soldier's dead blue eyeballs that he found
> Somewhere—hard as chalk, and blue as slate.
> He clicks them in his pocket while he talks.

Owing to his experience of the war, Nemerov's poetry was informed by an acute historical awareness, and this sense of history is pervasive in the poetry of this period.

It is certainly one of the most distinctive features to be found in the writing of Anthony Hecht, whose first book, *A Summoning of Stones,* came out in 1954. From the outset, Hecht was something of a metrical virtuoso; his poetry abounds in elegant technical ornaments and breathtaking inventions. Yet he is also the poet of this period most obsessively given to contemplating the horror of history. There is thus, in a poem such as "A Roman Holiday," a kind of valor in the extraordinary control with which he orders the emotional chaos which he sees at the heart of that horror:

> I write from Rome. It is late afternoon
> Nearing the Christmas season. Blooded light
> Floods through the Colosseum, where platoon
> And phalanx of the Lord slaved for the might
> Of Titus' pleasure. Blood repeats its tune
> Loudly against my eardrums as I write,
> And recollects what they were made to pay
> Who out of worship put their swords away.
>
> The bells declare it. "Crime is at the base,"
> Rings in the belfry where the blood is choired.
> Crime stares from the unknown, ruined face,
> And the cold wind, endless and wrath-inspired,
> Cries out for judgment in a swampy place
> As darkness claims the trees. "Blood is
> required,
> And it shall fall," below the Seven Hills
> The blood of Remus whispers out of wells.

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Another even younger poet of consummate skill whose work generated a considerable amount of excitement in this period was James Merrill, born in 1926. In his early books—*The Black Swan* (1946), *First Poems* (1951), and *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959)—Merrill displayed a highly refined language which registered an extraordinary subtlety of feeling and perception. Yet early on he was drawn to the problem of communicating through the "glassen surface of poetry" as his subject, as we find in the poem called "The Octopus" from *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*:

> There are many monsters that a glassen surface
> Restrains. And none more sinister
> Than vision asleep in the eye's tight
> translucence.
> Rarely it seeks now to unloose
> Its diamonds. Having divined how drab
> a prison
> The purest mortal tissue is,
> Rarely it wakes . . .

The generation that emerged immediately after the war—the poets we have been speaking of here—shared honors and attention in the postwar years with a slightly older group of writers who, in varying degrees, could already be said to occupy the scene. This group included such notable talents as Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, and Randall Jarrell, all born in the second decade of the century, and Theodore Roethke, born in 1908.

Orderliness, civility, and restraint marked the early work of Elizabeth Bishop, yet her unembellished but highly resonant language always contained an undercurrent of terror that made itself felt. Here is a passage from "The Bight" (from the collection she published in 1955):

> There is a fence of chicken wire along the dock
> where, glinting like little plowshares,
> the blue-gray shark tails are hung up to dry
> for the Chinese restaurant trade . . . .
> The bight is littered with old correspondences.
> Click. Click. Goes the dredge,
> and brings up a dripping jawful of marl.
> All the untidy activity continues,
> awful but cheerful.

"Awful but cheerful" was a note sounded in many of Bishop's best poems, and her work proved to have more staying power than that of many of the poets who achieved a flashier reputation at the time.

Theodore Roethke was another poet who, despite the obvious influences that sometimes marked his work—Auden's, Bogan's, and Yeats's, particularly—developed a highly individual style. His first book, *Open House,* had appeared as early as 1941, yet it was in the late Forties and early Fifties, in such books as *The Lost Son* (1948), *Praise to the End!* (1951), and *The Waking* (1953), that he came to master an idiom all his own. At times strictly metrical and at times breaking loose into a freer style, the poems in these books were characterized by a headlong, manic energy and what Roethke himself described as an "animistic" or "primitivistic" expressiveness. It is not a poetry easily quoted in passages, however, for it registers its effects—rather as some of the new painting of this period was doing—through its overall pattern of feeling.

Without doubt, however, the most powerful voice in this group belonged to Robert Lowell, who quickly emerged as a representative figure of the period. After privately printing his first book during the war, Lowell published *Lord Weary's Castle* to extraordinary acclaim in 1946. It promptly won the Pulitzer Prize, and was generally recognized as a literary landmark. In Lowell's poetry the whole tradition of Metaphysical-Symbolist verse seemed to be carried to a new apex of achievement. Technically brilliant, it was also marked by an intense religious feeling and a profound historical consciousness, and all of its remarkable resources were placed at the service of a violent, almost nihilistic vision. Its extraordinary qualities were given an especially forceful expression in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," which for many younger poets of the Fifties attained the status of a classic.

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The empty winds are creaking and the oak
Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
The boughs are trembling and a gaff
Bobs on the untimely stroke
On the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell
In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It's well;
Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
Mart once of supercilious, wing'd clippers,
Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
Here in Nantucket, and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the
sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

At the time these lines from the "Quaker Graveyard" were published, Lowell's work was generally taken to represent the future course of American poetry—and for some years, of course, it did. Yet when he published his next book, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs,* in 1951, its long title poem, written in couplets and iambic pentameter, was not received with the same enthusiasm. For the first time, Lowell came in for severe criticism—and this, too, as we shall see, would have its effect on the future course of poetry, both his own and that of other writers. Unfortunately, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* became something of a casualty of the critical wars, and remains to this day an underrated work.

Lowell's work could by no means be said to represent anything like the mainstream style of poetry in the postwar period, however. If there was such a thing as a common style in the poetry of those years, it was based on the work of W. H. Auden. Flawless as a practitioner of traditional English verse, Auden had also brought a good deal of journalistic flair to writing about contemporary events and contemporary ideas, and his poetry exerted a pervasive influence on those writers who were eager to achieve an easy fluency in dealing with the objects of their own experience and the history of their time.

One of the most gifted of the poets who succumbed to Auden's spell was Karl Shapiro, as one can see in these lines from "University" which appeared in *Person, Place and Thing,* published in 1942, and in which the very lilt and manner of the Auden style is expertly rehearsed:

To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew
Is the curriculum. In mid-September
The entering boys, identified by hats,
Wander in a maze of mannered brick . . .

Shapiro continued to publish a great deal of poetry in this mode in the decade following the war—the years in which he also served as the editor of *Poetry* magazine. Yet the Auden style, with its practiced civility, its perfect meters, and its studied detachment—as impersonal in its way as anything ever advocated by Eliot—was soon to prove of limited utility when it came to dealing with the kind of personal and wayward emotions which lay outside its range. In Shapiro's case the revolt against this whole way of thinking about poetry manifested itself with something of a vengeance when, in 1964, he brought out *The Bourgeois Poet,* a book in which all the fine literary manners acquired from Auden were abandoned and the quite different manners of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl,* published eight years earlier, were appropriated with a passion.

For many of the younger poets who joined the ranks of the formalists in the Fifties, an event of considerable importance was the publication in 1957 of a new anthology—*The New Poets of England and America* edited by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson, themselves distinguished members of this new generation of poets. This anthology resolutely reaffirmed the commitment to form and tradition which had been the governing outlook of the best poetry produced by their elders, and was clearly meant to be taken as a sign that such a commitment would continue to determine the course of poetry for the foreseeable

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future. But this was not to be, at least in the immediate future. From the perspective of 1985, *The New Poets of England and America* now has more the look of a book that marks the end of an era than of one that marks the beginning of one. Ten years later a couple of the editors and some of its contributors were writing in a very different style. Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956), even for many who did not admire it as art, had caused a rupture in poetic thought that proved to be fateful.

The father of this rebellion against formal verse—against everything that Eliot and Auden and Lowell had stood for, and against everything that the New Criticism and *Understanding Poetry* had upheld as essential to poetic achievement—was William Carlos Williams, who had remained something of an "underground" figure in the world of poetry for nearly half a century. But now his hour had come. In his *Autobiography,* published in 1951, he had attacked Eliot for giving poetry back to the academy, and now Williams was to have his revenge. Suddenly a good many young poets, and some not so young, were looking to *him* as the master, and to his use of free verse and "native" speech as the touchstones of authentic poetic expression. The iambic line and the Metaphysical-Symbolist aesthetic were discovered to be the instruments of repression and thus to constitute a threat to personal as well as literary freedom. For the poets who took up this credo, the nature of reality was anything but paradoxical or unknowable. They believed themselves to be the custodians of the only truths that mattered, and they looked upon poetry as a way of expressing those truths as directly and nakedly as possible.

Nakedly express them was unquestionably what Ginsberg did in *Howl,* which carried an introduction by Williams and launched the author on a career which eventually resulted, oddly enough, in his election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the publication, last year, of an 837-page volume of *Collected Poems.* No doubt it helped the book that it became the subject of a famous censorship trial. But this was only emblematic of its real appeal, which was an appeal to wholesale rebellion in politics, in sexual behavior, and in every realm of personal and social experience. A poetry devoted to the radical liberation of the self was inevitably autobiographical as well as political, as we can see in this passage from "America":

> America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
> America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
> I can't stand my own mind.
> America when will we end the human war?
> Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
> I don't feel good don't bother me.
> I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
> America when will you be angelic?

Whatever one thinks of lines like this as poetry, *Howl*—in which this poem first appeared—proved to be something of an explosion, and it had some surprising results.

The most surprising, perhaps, and certainly the most consequential, was the literary conversion of Robert Lowell, the doyen of the formal poets and the favorite of the New Critics, who had nurtured his talent and felt vindicated by his success. Lowell had been savagely attacked by William Carlos Williams in the latter's review of *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* in *The New York Times Book Review*—a new experience for a poet who had been lavished with honors from the beginning of his career. Lowell then had a personal encounter with Ginsberg's Beat movement on a visit to San Francisco, and this was said to have deeply affected him. No doubt there were other causes, too, which contributed to Lowell's change of heart and his change of style. Whatever they were, when he published *Life Studies* in 1959—eight years after *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*—he was a very different writer. His new poems were not only freer in form but more openly biographical in content—so much so that many of his former teachers and admirers were simply aghast at what and how

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he was now writing. For, taking his cue from the "raw" verse (as he called it) of the Beats, Lowell now offered his readers poetry that seemed to be a naked "confession" of his own experience. Even at its best, as in "Skunk Hour," it was far removed from the kind of poem he had been writing in his earlier work:

> One dark night,
> my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
> I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
> they lay together, hull to hull,
> where the graveyard shelves on the town . . . .
> My mind's not right.
>
> A car radio bleats,
> "Love, O careless Love . . . ." I hear
> my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
> as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
> I myself am hell;
> nobody's here—
>
> only skunks, that search
> in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
> They march on their soles up Main Street:
> white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
> under the chalk-dry and spar spire
> of the Trinitarian Church.
>
> I stand on top
> of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
> a mother skunk with her column of kittens
> swills the garbage pail.
> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
> and will not scare.

Still, despite the complaints—some of them bitter—from the writers who had nurtured him in earlier years, Lowell scored a stunning public success with *Life Studies.* Critics who normally paid little or no attention to new poetry competed for the honor of praising the book in print, and the book itself soon exerted a tremendous influence. Suddenly a new movement devoted to such confessional verse acquired a great vogue, and Lowell was once again seen to be the master of the moment.

Though this confessional poetry was mainly an American phenomenon, its chief critical spokesman was the English critic A. Alvarez, who promptly produced an anthology—*The New Poetry* (1962)—designed to canonize and exploit the movement. In his introduction to this book, Alvarez claimed that the new poets represented a rebellion against the "gentility" of the late Forties and early Fifties. This gentility, Alvarez wrote, "is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good . . . ." As a description of the beliefs that had governed the writing of *Lord Weary's Castle,* this is nonsense, of course. But Alvarez was writing with a sense that history was on his side, and there was no shortage of poets to confirm his view.

Yet within ten years of the publication of *Life Studies,* Lowell himself had become something of a victim of the movement he had created. In a succession of books more notable for their personal revelations than for their poetic power—*Notebook* (1969, revised and expanded in 1970), *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973), *History* (1973), *The Dolphin* (1973), and *Day by Day* (1977)—Lowell came more and more to seem a stymied writer. Although some of these books were extravagantly praised on their publication, today they have ceased to serve as literary models. Although the book itself is out of print, *Lord Weary's Castle* seems in many ways a good deal closer to us.

When Donald Allen published his "alternative" anthology called *The New American Poetry* in 1960, hard on the heels of the Beat movement and other rebellions against the formal poetry of the Fifties, he divided his *révolté* poets into five groups: the Black Mountain school, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beats, the New York poets, and an unnamed splinter group led by Gary Snyder. These were the writers who, according to Allen, were descended from Williams and Pound and remained opposed to Eliot.

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Of these groups, the only one to achieve a certain chic *as* a group has been the New York poets. Led by John Ashbery, who must now be the recipient of more literary prizes than any other living poet, and the late Frank O'Hara, these poets took their inspiration from the French Dadaists and Surrealists and from the painters of the New York School. Although they often seem to have no subject but themselves, they do not write in a confessional mode. On the contrary, they look upon poetry as a realm of artifice far removed from the reality of anything but language. Theirs is a poetry of a certain kind of aestheticism that draws its inspiration from the comedy of Camp culture. Consecutive thought is alien to their style, and "meaning" is shunned as a philistine idea. Indeed, their poems are written according to a code which few "lay" readers could be expected to understand. Thus, Ashbery writes in one of his early poems—"A Vase of Flowers," from *The Tennis Court Oath*—about the very pointlessness of hoping to convey either an image or the emotion that the image might contain:

> The vase is white and would be a cylinder
> If a cylinder were wider at the top than at the bottom.
> The flowers are red, white and blue.
>
> All contact with the flowers is forbidden.
>
> The white flowers strain upward
> Into a pallid air of their references,
> Pushed slightly by the red and blue flowers.
>
> If you were going to be jealous of the flowers,
> Please forget it.
> They mean absolutely nothing to me.

Perhaps what appeals in such poetry is the very notion that poetry should not mean anything in particular, but instead offer the reader a literary object akin to a painting or a collage. Whatever the reason, in Ashbery's case at least it is poetry that has won much attention and acclaim—a phenomenon that remains to be explained. But as a "school," it would now appear to have left us very little. When one re-reads the principal anthology devoted to this group—David Shapiro and Ron Padgett's *Anthology of New York Poets,* published in 1970—one can scarcely find a single poem worth saving.

Still another attempt in this period to graft American poetry onto an alien Surrealist tradition may be found in the writings of Robert Bly and some of his associates. Bly's principal literary sources are the German poet Georg Trakl and the Chilean, Pablo Neruda. As James Dickey observed, "Bly believes that the salvation of English poetry is to be found in non-English poetry, particularly Spanish and French and German, understood as badly as possible." There is more than a little truth in this.

Unlike the poets of the New York school, who were drawn to Surrealism precisely because of its flaunting of what is obviously unreal, the true believers of the Bly persuasion embrace the Surrealist impulse as a mode of authenticity and truth. According to this view, it is only by transcending consciousness in a search for "deep" images that the poet can achieve something authentic. The result, more often than not, is a subjectivity that strikes the reader as a willful obscurity. This is an example from Bly's *The Light Around the Body* (1967), in a poem called "Watching Television":

> Sounds are heard too high for ears,
> From the body cells there is an answering bay;
> Soon the inner streets fill with a chorus of barks.
>
> We see the landing craft coming in,
> The black car sliding to a stop,
> The Puritan killer loosening his guns.
>
> Wild dogs tear off noses and eyes
> And run off with them down the street—
> The body tears off its own arms and throws them into the air.

Reviewing *The Light Around the Body,* Robert Mazzocco correctly observed that

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> . . . many of [Bly's] lines could be transplanted quite easily into neighboring poems, and lines from neighboring poems transplanted right back into the empty spaces, with few readers the wiser.

But it was precisely this, perhaps, that made the Surrealist style so attractive to so many student poets of the Sixties and Seventies. Without really learning anything about the art of poetry, they could all harbor the illusion that they were in possession of the requisite "deep" imagery. By and large, this mini Surrealist movement produced more disciples than it did real poems.

While these and other manifestations of literary and personal rebellion were sweeping the scene in the Sixties and Seventies, the real poetic achievements of those years were still to be found among the writers who remained true to the traditions of formal verse-writing and were never tempted to join one or another of the new movements. Today their best work still seems fresher and less academic than much of the verse produced by the *révoltés*. I think particularly of such wonderful poems as William Jay Smith's "Elegy for a Young Actor," from *The Travelers Tree* (1980); Richard Wilbur's title poem and "The Undead," from *Advice to a Prophet* (1961), as well as "The Writer," from *The Mind-Reader* (1976); James Merrill's "Childlessness" and "Scenes from Childhood," from *Water Street* (1962), and "Days of 1935," from *Braving the Elements* (1972); Howard Nemerov's "A View from an Attic Window," from *New and Selected Poems* (1960); Elizabeth Bishop's "First Death in Nova Scotia," from *Questions of Travel* (1965), and "Poem" and "One Art," from *Geography III* (1976); and "On Handling Some Small Shells from the Windward Islands," by May Swenson, from *Half Sun Half Sleep* (1967). These count as some of the period's best moments. Some of Donald Hall's poems from the mid- to late-Seventies, such as "Eating the Pig," "Ox-Cart Man," and "Names of Horses," from *Kicking the Leaves* (1978), are among the finest of his career. Also to be remembered here are Anthony Hecht's splendid poems "It Out-Herods Herod. Pray You, Avoid It." and "'More Light! More Light!'" from *The Hard Hours* (1967).

Other poets who produced memorable work in these years are David Wagoner, Henri Coulette, Donald Justice, and the late L. E. Sissman. Donald Justice, born in 1925 and thus a member of the Wilbur-Nemerov-Hecht generation, combines a strictness of form, limpidity of language, and precision of feeling that is matched only by the other formalist members of this generation. Here is the poem, "But That Is Another Story":

I do not think the ending can be right.
How can they marry and live happily
Forever, these who were so passionate
At chapter's end? Once they are settled in
The quiet country house, what will they do,
So many miles from anywhere?
Those blond ancestral ghosts crowding the stair,
Surely they disapprove? Ah me,
I fear love will catch cold and die
From pacing naked through those drafty halls
Night after night. Poor Frank. Poor Imogene.
Before them now their lives
Stretch empty as great Empire beds
After the lovers rise and the damp sheets
Are stripped by envious chambermaids.

And if the first night passes brightly enough,
What with the bonfires lit with old love letters,
That is no inexhaustible fuel, perhaps?
Time knows how it must end, not I.
Will Frank walk out one day
Alone through the ruined orchard with his stick,
Strewing the path with lissome heads
Of buttercups? Will Imogene
Conceal in the crotches of old trees
Love notes for grizzled gardeners and such?
Meanwhile they quarrel and make it up,
Only to quarrel again. A sudden storm
Pulls the last fences down. Now moonstruck sheep
Stray through the garden all night peering in
At the exhausted lovers where they sleep.

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"Beyond the Hunting Woods," from *The Summer Anniversaries* (1960), and "Bus Stop," from *Night Light* (1967), also rank among the best work of this period.

L. E. Sissman, born 1928, wrote poetry while an undergraduate at Harvard, but his first book, *Dying: An Introduction,* did not appear until 1968. This was followed by *Scattered Returns* (1969) and *Pursuit of Honor* (1971). Sissman is the postwar poet who best conflates a metrical, rhyming line with ordinary things and experiences of the world. Here is the first part of "Homage to Clotho: A Hospital Suite" (from the posthumously published volume *Hello, Darkness,* 1978), written while Sissman was dying of cancer. (He eventually succumbed to the disease in 1976.)

> Nowhere is all around us, pressureless,
> A vacuum waiting for a rupture in
> The tegument, a puncture in the skin,
> To pass inside without a password and
> Implode us into Erewhon. This room
> Is dangerously unguarded: in one wall
> An empty elevator clangs its doors,
> Imperiously, for fodder; in the hall,
> Bare stretchers gape for commerce; in the air
> Outside, a trembling, empty brightness falls
> In hunger on those whom it would devour
> Like any sparrow hawk as darkness falls
> And rises silently up the steel stairs
> To the eleventh and last floor, where I
> Reside on sufferance of authorities
> Until my visas wither, and I die.

Sissman also wrote some stunning narrative poems at a time when the form was all but forgotten—the best among them being "Going Home, 1945," and "The West Forties; Morning, Noon, and Night," from *Dying: An Introduction.*

But it was left to a poet who began writing long before most of these poets took up their pens to emerge as the most compelling American voice of the last two decades. This is Robert Penn Warren, who in his ninth decade continues the astonishing output he commenced over twenty years ago, when, at the age of sixty, it seemed that his career as a poet might be over. To be sure, Warren's recent work contains many bad moments. But that is the risk inherent in Warren's poetic undertaking, in which an aging but irrepressible poet voraciously and passionately consumes experience in a quest for glory, nobility, and truth. When Warren hits his stride in these late poems, he writes with a luminous quality that is his alone. This is from "Three Darknesses," from the selection devoted to new work in Warren's *New and Selected Poems, 1923-1985*:

> The nurse is still here. Then
> She is not here. You
> Are here but are not sure
> It is you in the sudden darkness. No matter.
> A damned nuisance, but trivial—
> The surgeon has just said that. A dress
> rehearsal,
> You tell yourself, for
> The real thing. Later. Ten years? Fifteen?
> Tomorrow, only a dry run. At
> 5 A.M. they will come. Your hand reaches out
> in darkness
> To the TV button. It is an old-fashioned
> western.
> Winchester fire flicks white in the dream-night.
> It has something to do with vice and virtue,
> and the vastness
> Of moonlit desert. A stallion, white and
> flashing, slips,
> Like spilled quicksilver, across
> The vastness of moonlight. Black
> Stalks of cacti, like remnants of forgotten
> nightmares, loom
> Near at hand. Action fades into distance, but
> You are sure that virtue will triumph.

Warren's is certainly one of the major achievements of the last twenty-five years.

There are other reasons to be cheered by the way our poetry has lately been developing, for suddenly the poetry scene of the Eighties can boast of a number of gifted and accomplished writers who have already produced important work. Herbert Morris, whose first book, *Peru,* was published in 1983, is clearly emerging as one of the decade's most significant voices. The recent

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publication of Peter Davison's selected poems, *Praying Wrong,* gave us another solid addition to our literature. ("Barn Fever" is an especially marvelous poem.) Each new volume by C. K. Williams shows an increase of power in this writer.

Most cheering of all as an augury of things to come has been the appearance of a fine group of younger poets, most of them writing formal verse that is marked by a notable seriousness and eloquence as well as a considerable technical fluency. Among them, I would especially cite the work of Brad Leithauser, Alan Shapiro, Elizabeth Spires, Rosanna Warren, William Logan, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Mary Jo Salter, Norman Williams, Richard Kenny, and Daniel Mark Epstein. Significantly, one notes a new interest in narrative poetry among some of these poets. To quote but one example, here is a passage from a long allegorical poem by Gjertrud Schnackenberg about Chopin called "Kremlin of Smoke":

His irritation at the threshold's creak
Beneath the servant's foot this afternoon
Had seemed rather enacted than experienced,
His petulant rebuke, the spectacle
In which it seemed he played it to the hilt,
An exiled Master flown into a passion
Who'd fled a nine-year-old's piano lesson
To lock himself upstairs into his room.
And while his scolded pupil's lowered face
In silhouette above the keyboard wore
His reprimand in prisms on her lashes,
a sylph staring, up close, into a pearl—
The glamour of vain outbursts lost on her,
The sweeping gesture of his obstinate
Refusal, even now, to come downstairs!—
A tantrum nearly comical, except
His struggle to restrain his brimming tears . . .

It looks, in fact, as if American poetry in the Eighties has found its way back to the kind of high style and high seriousness that characterized its finest achievements thirty and forty years ago.

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LINCOLN PERRY: Afternoon, Plaza. 1985. Oil on canvas, 50″x62″.

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IN THE WALL OF THE WASTE

(Homage to James Joyce and Samuel Beckett)

Given a handful of tools – a hammer, an awl,
A saw, some bricks or wood –
There are those who can batter a hole in a wall
Whether built in the present or past,
Solid, for peace or for war:
Hadrian's Wall forbidding the North,
Or the Great Wall of China,
Or the walls our cities are.
Among us are those who can breach such a wall,
Open a door in it,
Trim it exactly to size, fit it with lintel and threshold,
And stepping across it, enter the present or past.

But the man to be thought on is he
Who casting aside plane, hammer and nails,
Dropping his crowbar and saw, no longer of use,
Goes out by himself, all alone,
Into the desert where even the wind has died down
For hundreds of years, and the grass has withered away
And the earth is a stone.
The man to admire is he
Who there, in a stillness of death,
With shards that he breaks with his fist from the stone,
Then mixes with spittle and dungchips and blood,
Frames up a door in the wall of the waste
And shapes it handsome and wide, built to endure,
And hears as he dies how the wind, that was nowhere till then,
Begins to stir up
A whirling of dust from the floor of the waste
And blows it across the threshold he's built
Of the door in the wall that was nowhere till then,
Into a space that's beyond
Where time is beginning again
And flowers may root in the dark
And be there in the dawn if it comes.

Maurice English

Printed in honor of the
James Joyce Conference
Philadelphia: June 1985

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In 1974 the Helen Drutt Gallery opened in Philadelphia with an exhibition schedule which included works by such artists as Mark Burns, Dale Chilhuly, William Daley, Wayne Higby, Richard DeVore, Lizbeth Stewart, Lenore Tawney, David Gilhooly, Paula Winokur, Robert Winokur, Toshiko Takaezu, Peter Voulkos, Albert Paley, Olaf Skoogfors and Rudolf Staffel. At that time it was one of the first galleries in the United States to make a commitment to the late twentieth century art which grew out of the post World War II resurgence of modern crafts. It recognized the changes that the craft movement was expressing in its fusion with mainstream art concepts, and the recent relocation has enabled the gallery to broaden its activities with the presentation of project installations. At the same time, the gallery also remained committed to supporting the historical and traditional attitudes which are a continuing part of the craft field.

During the past eleven years, the Helen Drutt Gallery has maintained extensive archives which have become a major resource for artists, museums, universities and collectors. Through exhibitions and lectures the gallery activities encourage scholarship, critical analysis and the development of private and public collections.

An article in the August/September 1979 edition of *American Crafts* stated that the Helen Drutt Gallery "has become a place where artists, students and collectors meet. It is to the crafts what Alfred Stieglitz's "291" Gallery was to photography earlier in the century."

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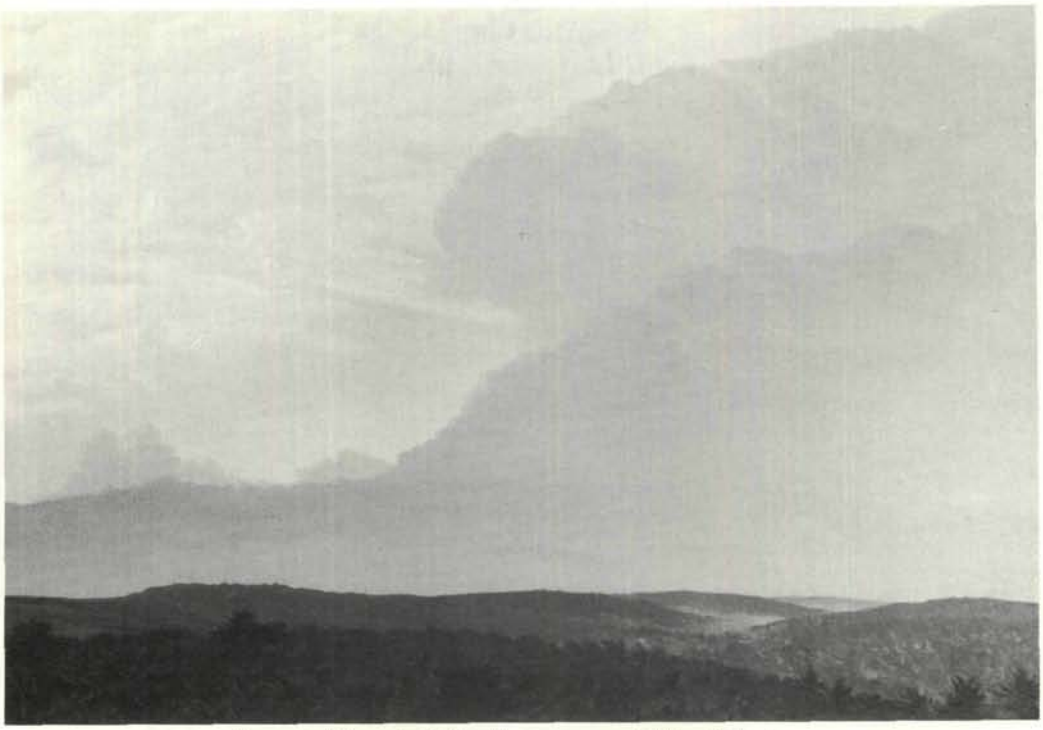

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